Confab 2013

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“Nobody is handing content strategy down from on high” – Kristina Halvorson

In her opening keynote Kristina Halvorson co-opted the list format to run down 10 things that everybody at Confab had in common. At the core of the list was a call to action, that everybody in the room had the power to make changes to their organisations, and should use the conference as a big opportunity to learn things that would help solve the problems with content that all of us share.

Not all of the problems, mind you, she pointed out that if you locked yourself in a room for 48 hours and solved every problem that had ever been created with content ever, another 100,000 problems would have sprung up whilst you were working.

Why is content so difficult for organisations?

It isn’t that individually we are “doing it wrong”.

Kristina argues that businesses and organisations just don’t have the infrastructure in place to deal with the incredible demands that digital publishing has put on us. She described our websites as being “land-fill”, where we’ve generally just dumped everything we’ve published in the previous five years. Plus the stuff from the old server that we migrated over during the last redesign and promised to “fix later”. And the microsites where the marketing team had decided that the website was just so screwed already they’d rather just tack an entirely brand new thing on the side instead.

Trying to move from a “launch it and leave it” mentality to one where we care about the full content life-cycle is hard and involves changing the behaviour of a lot of people. As Kristina observed, so many people — SEO people, social media people, UX people, designers, editors, developers — touch every single bit of content as it goes through the publishing process.

Kristina compared the environment in a lot of companies to the old Wild West – there isn’t anybody really empowered to say “No!” in most businesses to the creation of new content. And a lot of times our individual success is measured by how much activity we do, how many projects we can run, how quickly we can respond to demands from our boss. These are the conditions to create content madness.

She showed a big picture of Michael Stipe as part of her list, and explained that one of the things we all had in common in the room was that “Everybody hurts”. We are all facing similar issues. But, she said, we’ve all also got a great opportunity. No set of people has ever faced this set of problems before, so it is a great chance to get in on the ground floor and change the way that companies deal with content. Kristina admitted that everybody was tackling the problem from different perspectives and with different agendas, but said even those “faking it until they make it” have the chance to make an impact.

“Nobody is handing content strategy down from on high” she said. “That’s not the way it works.”

“Voice and Tone: Creating Content for Humans at MailChimp” – Kate Kiefer Lee

I very much enjoyed Kate Kiefer Lee’s presentation about tone and voice. Over the years I’ve tended to write nearly everything, whether it is this blog or the Guardian’s Developer blog or the BBC Internet blog with the same sort of tone of voice. I’ve seldom had to write with a distinctively different personality in mind. Kate opened my eyes to some of the useful tools available to me if I ever have to.

She described part of her job as being “to guard MailChimp’s voice, and keep it consistent across a huge range of content.” She said that the voice stays the same, but the tone changes all the time. Emotions are key to her belief on how important this. The way we write copy on the web affects the way people feel. And, she said, if you get it right, you can “get people to do stuff” — visit websites, buy products, subscribe to services.

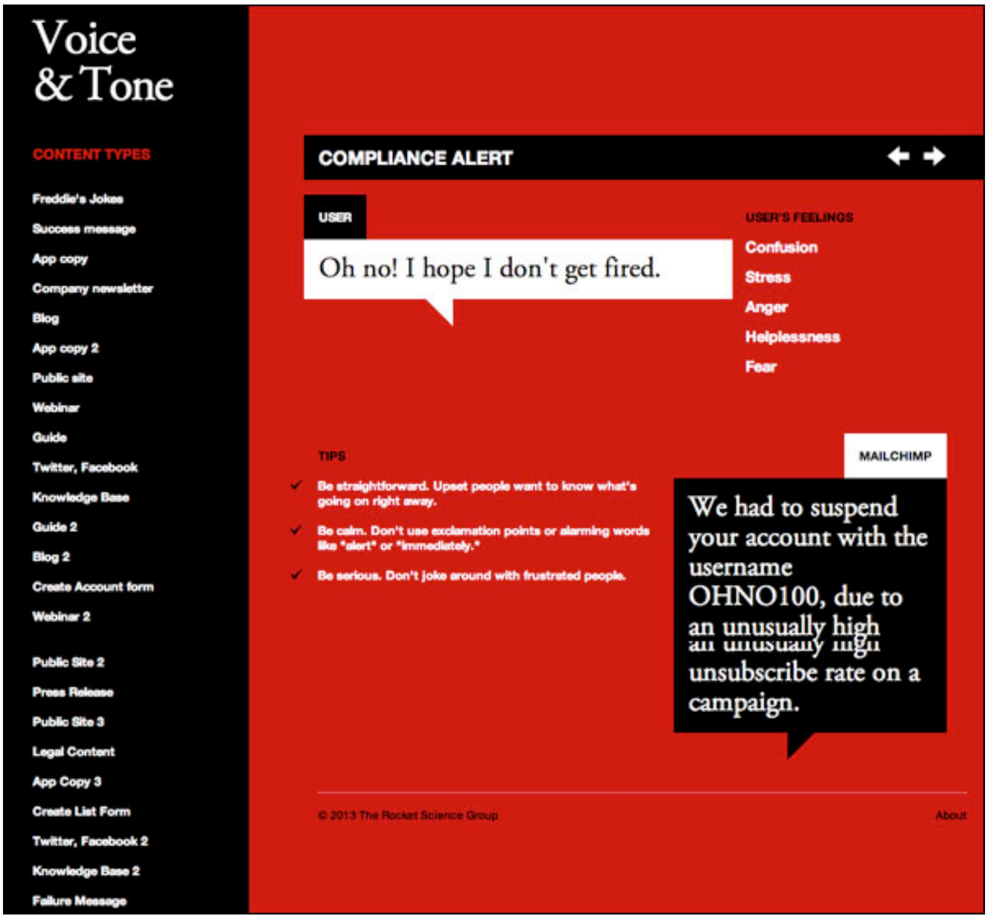
Kate said that for most companies it was about discovering or finding the voice, not creating it from scratch. Companies are made of people, and she suggested interviewing these people about the company as the first step. It wasn't a purely technical exercise, she explained, but you were asking them questions about what content they liked and didn't like, in order to see the moment their eyes light up and they get passionate about what they do.

A "This, but not this" list is a good tool for helping define voice, and she showed MailChimp's, which included statements like "helpful but not overbearing".

Kate spent some time talking about the difference between style guides and "voice and tone" guides, and why the latter were more important. There are plenty of established style guides that anyone can use, she reminded us. I attempt to stick to Guardian style, MailChimp use Yahoo!'s style guide. These are interchangeable — but voice and tone are unique to a company.

She praised the Gov.UK content style guide's advice on tone, saying it was not dumbed down, and rooted in empathy, and also singled out the MacMillan cancer charity for having clear writing guidelines.

As part of her work at MailChimp Kate had mapped their different types of content to the different emotions they might generate. They shouldn't be frivolous when the message they are delivering might be causing someone to worry that they were about to lose their job, or a mistake might cost their business a lot of money. MailChimp have made their voice and tone guide public. Green pages are at the happy end of the spectrum, red pages at the "angry-making" end.



Pages from the public MailChimp "Voice and Tone" guide

Kate gave a couple of examples of where a "funny" tone misfires because of the place it is being used. She showed a jaunty salutation from Mitt Romney when you unsubscribed from his campaign emails, and a customer service form from Woot whose call to action "We love to hear from our angry, disappointed and betrayed fans" doesn't maybe have the effect they intended when they wrote it.

I've always been a fan of proofing things on paper, but Kate suggested a technique for getting tone right was reading your writing out loud before publishing. "If I've published it on MailChimp's website," she said, "I've read it out loud. It stops you sounding like a robot." And, she said, reading out loud puts us in a conversational frame of mind, so makes us more empathetic. We don't want to say the wrong thing to people face-to-face, and that empathy is so often missing from our writing.

I did immediately toy with the idea of building a newspaper comment system that forces you to listen out loud to what you've just written, to see if you really do want to post "All benefit thieves should be shot."

"Strategy lives in delivery – not in meetings" – Leisa Reichelt

Although Leisa's overall talk touched on quite a few themes, it was her talk about working with prototyping that made the biggest impact on me. She explained that she seldom starts a project without having a front-end developer joined to her hip, and that she has abandoned the approach of generating "kilos and kilos" of documentation. That didn't work in 1998 she said, as IAs feverishly made massive site maps and bulky wireframe specifications, and it still doesn't work 15 years later.

Leisa said that at first glance prototyping sounds like a tactical activity, but actually it gives you a real opportunity to help influence company strategy. Whilst those around you are spending hours hand-waving in meetings trying to agree on abstract ideas, you can be making things that stakeholders can touch, and instantly agree or disagree with. You can also validate designs with users at a much earlier stage.

Prototyping also, she argues, helps you get into the right posture. Making things is a lean forward creative activity, whereas often, she said, documenting things is a defensive action to demonstrate that you have covered all the bases and have really thought a design and all the edge cases through.

"Problem solving is squiggly."

Designers always start with a straw-man early on, she argued, because when you don't fully understand the problem, the solution seems obvious. Good design didn't come out of getting things right first time she said, it came out of having lots of opportunities to improve. The way we solve problems isn't linear, in fact Leisa thinks we should just accept that "problem solving is squiggly", as we have peaks and troughs in our understanding of what we are trying to solve, and the appropriateness of the solutions we are proposing.

She showed a few of her own scrappy sketches, which she said were not so much specifications as "conversation documents" — things that had been drawn whilst talking to a developer about what needed to be built, and which were a more than sufficient level of documentation.

"Headphones are probably a sign that you are doing it wrong."

My only disappointment listening to Leisa was a personal one — it is incredibly hard to keep walking the walk of lean UX, and prototyping and sketching and collaborating, and I know that all too often I easily fall back into Leisa's cliche of the UX designer working alone in front of a glowing rectangle, Omnigraffle open and headphones on. Leisa went as far as to say that the "fetishism of Axure worries me" and that "Headphones are probably a sign that you are doing it wrong."

Surrey University case study

Leisa showed off some work she has done for Surrey University. Only by building a prototype which demonstrated the different type of navigation that could exist and asking people "explain to me how this doesn't work" has the project been able to escape the straight-jacket of every academic institution seemingly having the same old tired IA.

The prototype had been easy – built by Leisa using Bootstrap, mostly during commutes, after the front-end dev had set up the basic framework for her. “This was basic HTML monkey work,” she said, “Anyone can do this” — although she admitted she couldn’t have done it without the valuable help from her team Anna Debenham and Mat Johnson.

She did admit to the tactical inclusion of “the big-arsed footer” down at the bottom of the page, as a dumping ground for all of the links that the stakeholders were nervous about dropping from the homepage. Click-through tracking will determine whether any of them need to be elevated back up to the main page.

“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.”

Leisa worried that all too often when designers do get into a position of strategic influence within a business, they almost immediately stop being the kind of advocate for user-centred design that they need to be. In fact, they almost certainly start spending their time making the kind of PowerPoint decks that the rest of the company rolls their eyes at, before continuing to work in exactly the same way as they did before. She finished with a plea: “If you get a seat at the strategy table, make sure you are bringing in a prototype.”

“Talk to the people: customer interviews for content strategists” – Kerry-Anne Gilowey

Kerry-Anne Gilowey gave a decent overview of user research interview dos and don’ts, not least of which being why do them at all. Personas, analytics and audience segments delivered by the marketing department only get us so far towards hearing the real voice of the user. “If we can get the voice of the customer into the room,” she said, “it helps us decide on a lot of even the most basic things.”

Typically, Kerry-Anne says, an organisation will often just ask “Can’t we do it with surveys?” Sure, she said, surveys are cheaper, faster, easier and “certainly not as daunting”, but they carry a lot of disadvantages. People don’t always express themselves very well in writing, you can’t ask direct follow-up questions, and you don’t get any non-verbal cues.

Kerry-Anne appreciated that with a lot of introverts in the audience at Confab, meeting people face-to-face can be a scary prospect, and one technique she suggested was using props, like paper, Post-It notes and pens to give a session a focus that would help get over any awkwardness. And also help the interviewee remember more details about their customer experience.

And you have have to remember that it is their customer experience you are trying to get at. Kerry-Anne said one of the most useful phrases is “Tell me more about that.” It isn’t a question, it is more of a subtle command. She also urged interviewers not to interrupt. Leaving long awkward pauses can be hard, but it needs to be done. “Their train of thought is more important than yours” she observed, and said the most valuable thing you are going to have during these interviews is them talking — why step in and stop that?

There is a conflict when interviewing between empathy and objectivity, but you have nothing to lose by being friendly at the start. You need to make a connection with the subject in order to get them to open up. Asking questions about jobs, kids and pets to break the ice can often also yield extra contextual information that can inform later questions.

I was reminded of Raffaella Roviglioni’s talk at EuroIA in Romelast year, about her unexpected path from being an agronomist to doing UX design. One of her projects had been a field study in Africa, and she had learnt that it was better to have a vague plan of what you wanted to discuss and explore, and go with the flow during the session, than have a rigid script which you were unwilling to deviate from.

At Confab, Kerry-Anne Gilowey suggested that giving a bit of that plan away to the subject might be helpful. There would often be a “temporal disconnect” between when they had experienced the service you were asking them about, and the interview itself. Giving them some forewarning of the topics to be covered would help the subject recall the details and prepare.

Kerry-Anne also mentioned that some people can just be hard to get stuff out of. I must confess that is one reason I end up favouring the DIY approach. I feel like I'm happier cutting an interview short myself, than watching someone I've commissioned gamely struggle to make a session last 45 minutes because that is what they have been contracted to do.

A final great tip from Kerry-Anne was to listen out for the word "obviously". It almost certainly leads into something that will help you understand the mental model the user has constructed about how your business or business sector works.

"Applying Disney Storytelling to Content Strategy" – Max Greenhut

Max Greenhut took us through what he described as the "excruciating" development of of the DisneyWorld.com website via screenshots of the homepage from the Wayback Machine. I'm not going to go through them blow-by-blow, but they went from the inevitable "Welcome to DisneyWorld.com" splash page, to something approaching modern web design. To be honest, nothing makes me assume every web design I'm involved in is going to look absolutely bobbins in the future like the Wayback Machine does.

Of note during the course of changes over the years was the way the site gradually got more transactional, and mixed story-telling with a typical travel site date picker. Max also showed how at one point they had ditched category-based navigation, in favour of labels like "Discover", "Plan" and "Book". They found that didn't work as well, and it only lasted a year. And of course, there was the time when one of their navigational labels was "More magic". As if the homepage itself hadn't been magic enough yet.

Max went on to talk about the design of the Disney Vacation Club website. My understanding is that it is a sort of timeshare way of reserving holidays at Disney resorts.

We'd already heard a lot during the day about the need for empathy in content strategy, and I did wonder if in some of his language Max betrayed a corporate lack of empathy with some of the people involved in the process. I think some people find Disney calling their staff members or sales people "Cast members" cute, but I'm just reminded of the way that lots of digital job titles at the BBC had to be rooted in TV and Radio job titles, y'know, just… erm…because. And all through the talk Max continually referred to potential customers as "prospects". It is 100% accurate sales talk, but maybe left out a little bit of the human side of their future guests.

I don't think that problem came from the content strategists though. Max talked about how they'd worked hard to sell the Disney Vacation Club redesign into the business as being the digital version of the "cast members", and the design process involved a lot of observation of the sales team at work, really understanding the way that they sell the story of Disney vacations.

A real tricky point had been displaying the price on the website. From the user point of view it is one of the key transactional pieces of information, but the business were coy about putting the figure out in the public domain. It is really hard to imagine writing the content for a sales brochure where you are not allowed to mention the price. The fear was that without being able to read the user's face as they got the "sticker shock" of a price in the order of $20,000, the content couldn't then take the right next step to reassure them of the value the price delivered.

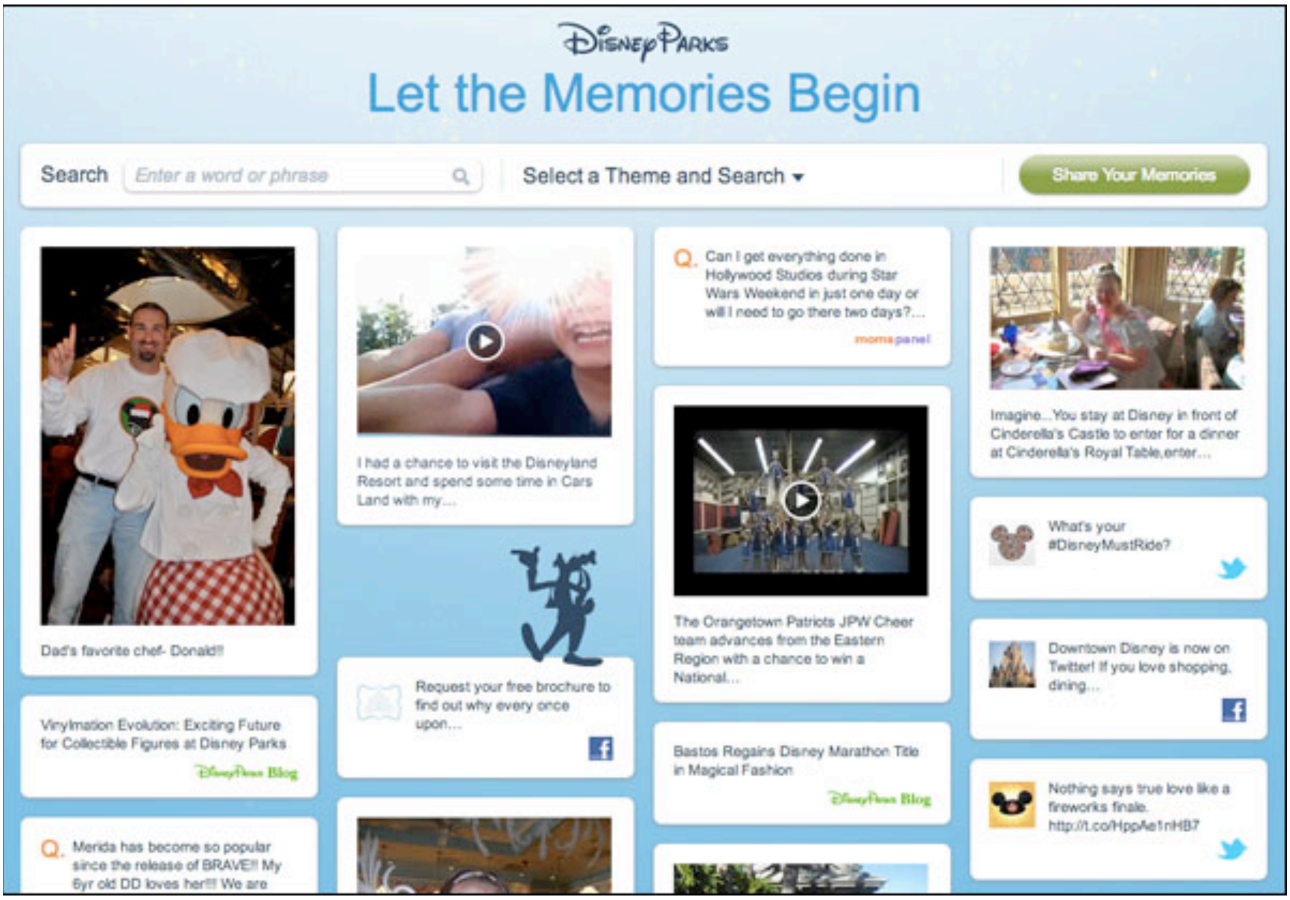
This has changed now, after the team got insight to prove to the business just what a vital piece of information it was in sealing the deal. In fact, Max said, the page about "How much does it cost" is now the highest converting page on the site. A validation of researching user needs over indulging in corporate cautiousness.

One thing I especially liked about the talk was when Max began to explain about how the Disney "Let the memories begin" campaign had come about. Max was the session I saw after Kerry-Anne Gilowey talking about interviewing users, and a key bit of insight for Disney had come about through just such a technique. Their marketing had been based around the premise that the smile your child had when they went on a Disney holiday was unique, and the smile that it therefore generated in their parents was also unique.

(I should add here that as I parent I've realised that if your children are immensely enjoying something, you can put up with any manner of lame entertainment. Which explains a lot of things existing.)

Max said that during research it emerged that parents were saying "I can see where you are going with this smile thing, but…to be honest…the smile they have is pretty much the same smile they have with all the great stuff that happens to them." That might have been a death knell for the idea of marketing the "unique" smile, but what emerged from the interviews was that parents said they had "unique memories" of a Disney holiday.

As a result, the content strategy of "Let the memories begin" is for Disney to simply get out of the way. It is all about show-casing user content about the memories that Disney has allowed them to create with their families.



I must confess that I have mixed feelings about Disney as a brand. Being pestered to go and see a Tinkerbell movie or buy "Disney Princesses™ " merchandise aggravates me. But Stephen P. Anderson's closing keynote at EuroIA last year talked about the business decisions and technical innovations that Walt Disney himself invested in and gambled on in the early years of the company, and I have come to really admire that. Also: Fantasia and Robin Hood exist.

"Why the disruptive 'mobile only' web redefines the web we know and (sort of) love" – Karen McGrane

Karen McGrane closed out day one of Confab with her usual mix of funny observations and keen insight. She started with the tale of how Ken Olsen's DEC computer corporation had gone from being second to only IBM, to completely obliterated in the course of a decade. This was because they made great computers. Amazing computers. Mini-computers that suddenly enabled a whole revolution in small business.

And Ken could not for the life of him see that anybody would ever have a reason to have a computer in the home*. So when personal computers began to appear, they simply couldn't compare with DEC for specifications. The were, in Karen's words, cheap and plastic and trashy. They were laughable because they stored memory on cassette tapes. They were like a child's toy compared to a DEC machine. And they dominated the market.

Karen explained that disruption to industry often happens when people who have previously been excluded from accessing a technology, get access to a cheap inferior version of it. It has happened time and time again in technology. But it doesn't matter that it is inferior, because it is the access that makes the difference.

She forsees the same thing happening with the desktop web, and insurgent mobile. Karen had an impressive set of figures illustrating just how many people in the developed world only access the internet through their smartphones, and who have no broadband access at home. That number is especially large in the US amongst ethnic minorities and the poor. These "mobile only" internet users are going to totally disrupt our idea of what the web is. And Karen guessed that most people working in the web have spent more time on conversations about the tiny fractions of users who don't have JavaScript enabled rather than they have about these "mobile only" consumers.

This is all great news for content strategy people, because it gives us the chance to rip up twenty years worth of bad content design on the desktop and start afresh. Yay!

Well, sort of.

Karen pointed out how irked she was by blog posts touting "10 great ways to write for the mobile web." There is no such thing as writing for the mobile web, Karen said, there is just good writing. In fact, Karen half-joked, if you just started concentrating on doing "good writing", you'd end up with a better experience on desktop and mobile anyway, without having to redesign or re-develop a single page.

Sadly a lot of businesses have not seen it this way. They've been so desperate to get into mobile, that they hire a mobile team, and they build a mobile website, and it is different to the main website with different content because they are being cutting edge and agile. They make "a fun-sized candy bar version of their content." But they simply don't have customers who deserve a better or worse class of experience because of the device they are using — they have customers who want good content.

She cited the American Cancer Society saying they felt they had a moral imperative to make all of their content easily available on mobile because the overlap between people who only have internet access on their phone and who have poor access to health education is strong.

And she also had some examples of when it all goes wrong, including… ahem…the "Guardian truncation team" — a Tumblr dedicated to embarrassing headline truncations where the words in the headline don't fit a pre-defined grid space on a Guardian product which…erm…well…I may have had a hand in designing myself.

Karen finished with this thought: "Disruptive technologies eventually get good, or redefine what good is." Mobile only web usage is redefining what "good" is all around us right now.

"Think big(ger): Turning content strategy into a company value" – Gerhard Arnhofer

Gerhard Arnhofer was very entertaining when talking about his journey to build a content strategy for [Univadis®](), a medical content portal from [Merck]()/ [MSD]().

Gerhard's background was as a paramedic, but he said that with his own two hands he couldn't make an impact on healthcare worldwide. This role allowed him to do so. He explained that, like many services, Univadis® had started in 2001 as the result of a digital strategy that probably read in its entirety as "We must do something online".

By the time he got involved it had become a monster. 20 different content management systems — "because as you know they are cheap" Gerhard quipped — 250 content streams, and 20 corporate legal entities suggesting helpful "improvements" to disclaimers and terms and conditions and so forth.

And then Gerhard's boss said to him "Can you make a global digital content strategy for Univadis® in two months". Gerhard said his over-riding emotion at this point was "Panic!"

He then took us through what he thought were some of the key bits of the project, and one of the things that shone through was "hire experts". He said that Merck/MSD were much happier putting together a bespoke content strategy team that featured a few specialists from various different agencies, than they were in hiring a full service agency to deliver the whole project. And passion was a real key. Gerhard said if choosing between two people to work on content strategy, he'd always pick the person with the most passion.

They ended up making a 250 page content strategy cookbook. It sounds like it went into meticulous detail on how content should be styled and written. It does make me wonder if we will eventually get a wave of people promoting "Lean content strategy" or "Agile content strategy" moaning that people are putting too much effort into "documenting the damn thing", much as IAs have historically been prone to do.

A couple of things Gerhard said resonated with me and some projects I've worked on recently. One was not being afriad of re-use. Gerhard said it was pretty typical to rock up to a project and immediately announce that everything that had gone before was crap, and start afresh. But the bean counters in an organisation, he says, will argue, "Hang on. We've invested millions of dollars in this content over the last few years. And you are telling me that today we just write all of that off?" Gerhard said it was important to work out what could or should be re-used.

He also said that automation always paid off in the end, because every single manual intervention costs money. Reports, newsletters and analytics were especially ripe for automation.

Evaluation is important. “Sooner or later,” Gerhard said, “someone will knock on your door and demand to know why this one individual piece of content was or wasn’t included on the site anymore.” For Univadis® they had started assessing the content on a score-sheet with 40 or 50 KPIs like traffic levels, dwell time, retweets and so on and so on. Ultimately, though, what mattered was dollars. They ended up scoring content on cost. Anything costing less than a $1 a click was fine. Anything between $1 and $5 a click needed investigating. And any content costing over $5 a click needed to go. They found some content that was costing them as much as $200 per click.

Gerhard’s project moved the site from having 250 content streams to “just” 60, and got them down to one common content platform architecture, something he said he could never really have envisaged achieving. They also saved $4m in the first year. A success by any measure.

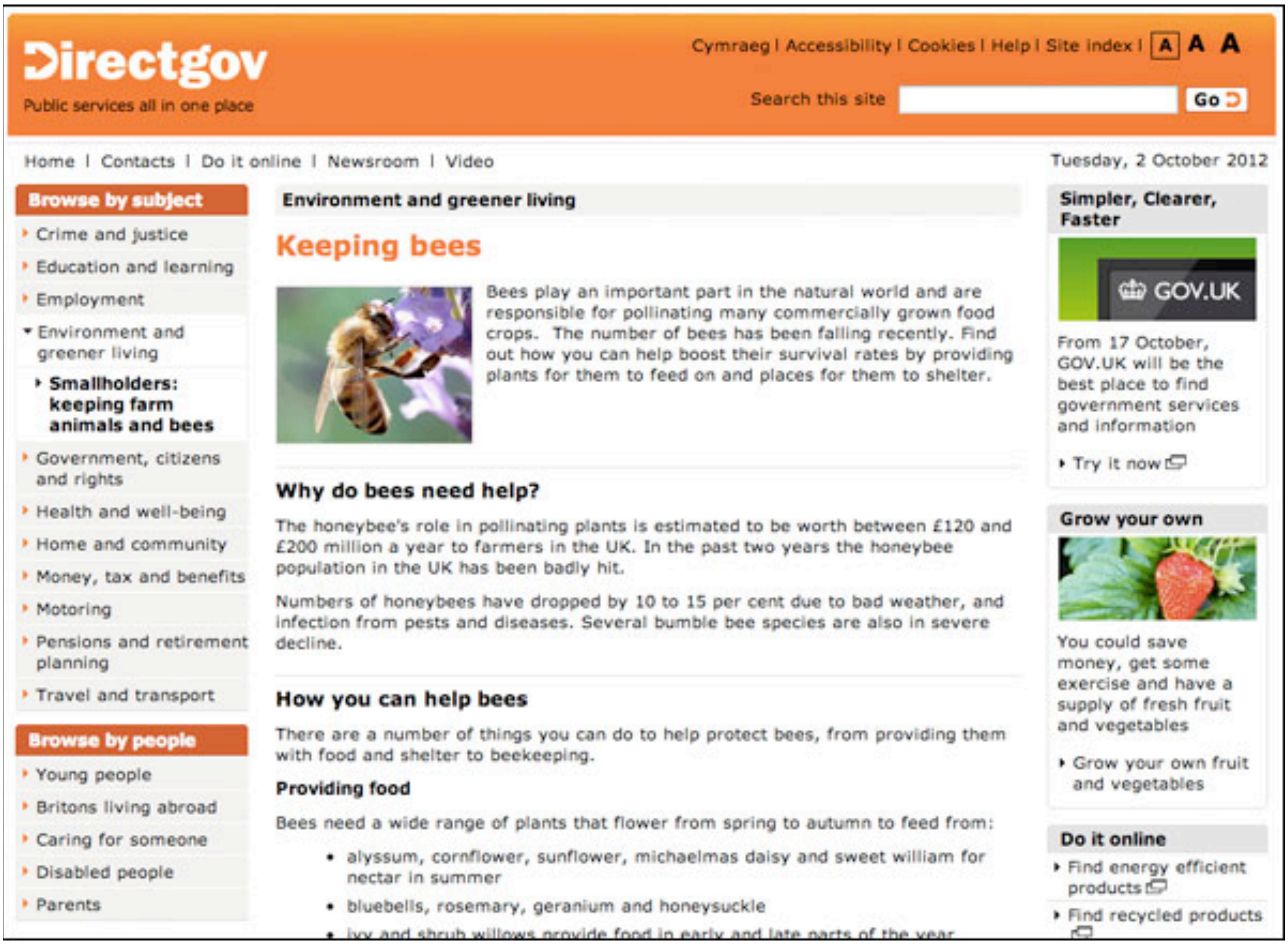
“A good content strategy can keep people out of jail” – Sarah Richards

Sarah Richards was taking Confab through the transformation of the British Government’s websites that has followed Martha Lane Fox’s recommendation of creating a Government Digital Service. That service is now a multi-disciplinary reality with over 200 developers, designers, content people, agile project managers, HR people and what-not working closely together from an office in Holborn.

“Fix publishing” was one of the key aims, and so the team now run two streams of content — one aimed at businesses and the public, and a stream about the internal workings of Government.

Sarah explained how the team went right back to basics, asking what users needed, not asking what Government thought users might want from Government. They did a massive content audit of their predecessor sites — DirectGov and BusinessLink — and asked of every single page “What is this for?”

This was no small task, DirectGov had 5,000 pages, BusinessLink had 70,000. They had a massive set of spreadsheets with every metric they could lay their hands on for each page, trying to answer the question “Do people want this?” Their premise was that a government website should only do what only government websites can do. Processing driving licenses? Yes. Advice about bee-keeping? No.



[In his talk earlier in the day, Gerhard Arnhofer] spoke about how important it was not just to assume that everything on a site was crap. Overall the GOV.UK team kept 45,000 content items, and binned 92,000. It has saved them £50-70m so far, and as Sarah observed, that isn’t the kind of loose change that even Governments can find tucked down the back of the sofa. Sarah said they have fewer pages, but users are now more engaged, and [the performance charts about their content are available on a public dashboard].

They try and govern their content with the 80/20 rule. What is up-front and centre on a page should be the information needed by 80% of the users. The edge cases and small print and exceptional circumstances information is still there, but you get to it via Google when you are searching for that specific use case.

When I blogged Max Greenhut's talk about Disney, I pointed out that the Wayback Machine shows us how none of our designs are going to avoid looking dated in the future. I wonder how time's cruel arrow will be with the GOV.UK project. It has a very distinctive aesthetic, and the welcome videos of slightly unshaven geeky people talking about everything being shiny and new will inevitably look as anachronistic as public information films of the 60s and 70s.

But the work they've done is exceptional. You can't help but be impressed whenever you see some before and after screenshots of transactions. It is so heartening to see so much common sense being applied to digital transactions, and I do hope it does set a trend for local government, international governments, NGOs and beyond.

And I'm also still pleasantly surprised that there hasn't been a tabloid monstering of the GOV.UK team. You know the sort of thing, a couple of wacky pictures of developers with an "Is this really acceptable behaviour from civil servants?" caption, some geeky terminology about 'Agile' being described as "meaningless jargon", moaning that the "politically-correct style guide" has "BANNED" words, and suggesting that the code has been "leaked" online on "hacker website Github" which is a threat to national security…

Sarah explained that it is worth doing the hard work to make things seem simple, and that the complexity of state transactions should be hidden from the user wherever possible. This isn't just about having a nice website. Doing less, and doing it better means that inhabitants of the UK are less likely to misunderstand their rights and obligations, or make costly or illegal mistakes when dealing with the state. "A good content strategy," she said, "can keep people out of jail."

"Using content strategy to get teens talking about mental health" – Chris Atherton

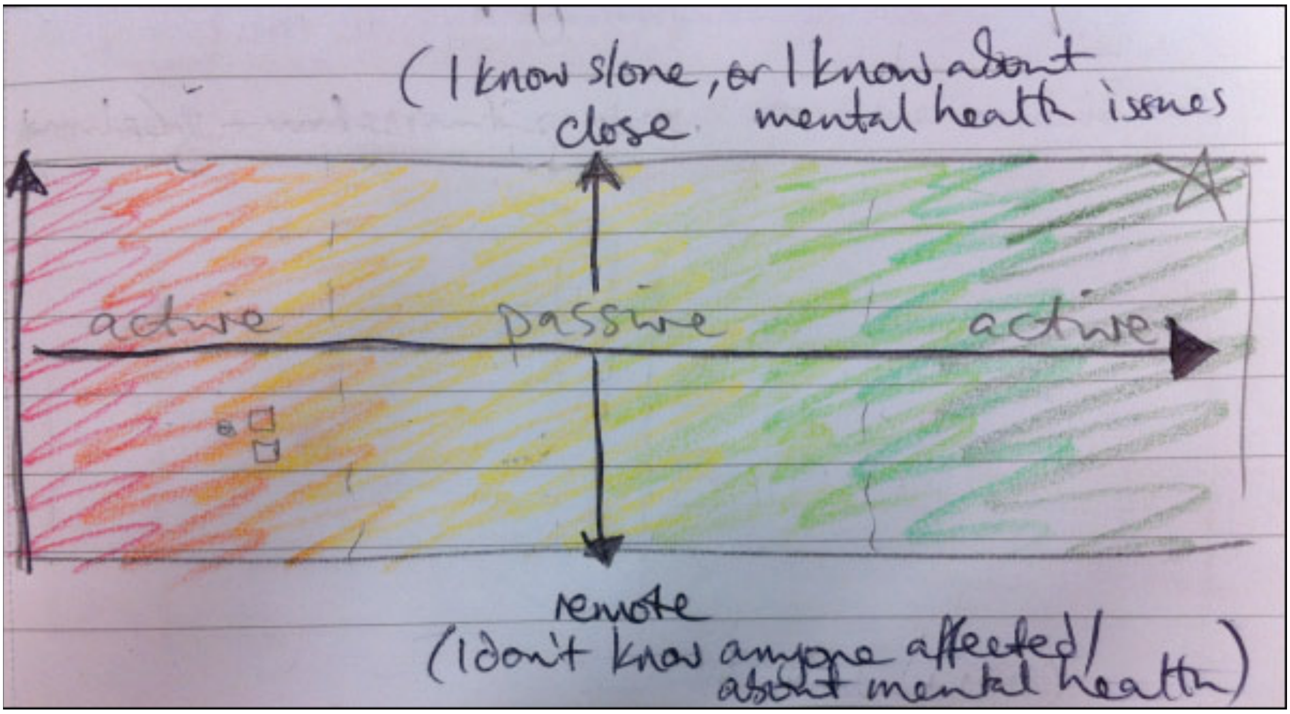
Chris Atherton was explaining how to build a content framework when none of the content exists yet. And you are trying to do it for a taboo subject. The project, with agency Numiko, had been to build the “Young People” component of a campaign to talk about mental health.

The fact that people don’t talk about mental health is one of the biggest issues with it, and Chris explained that even kids as young as 10 have picked up that there is something “weird” about discussing mental health, because they observe that adults don’t do it. The project she worked on was called Time to change.

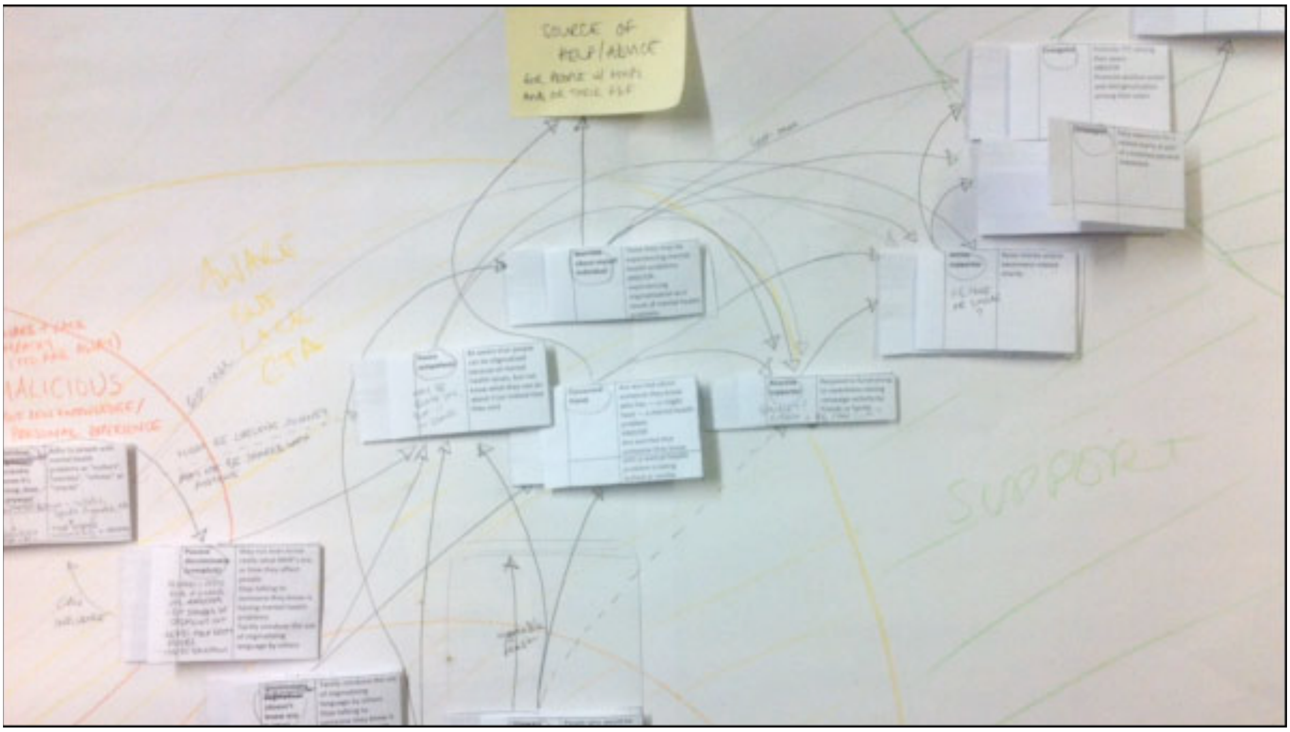
In order to start working out the content they needed, they did some card-sorting. Not so much to organise content as an IA typically might, but in order to get potential users to rank an order of how “excruciating” it would be for them to do particular elements of the campaign. Was texting a friend who was suffering a mental health problem better or worse than a face-to-face chat, for example?

Chris outlined a really interesting way to use personas in relation to content. They had gathered some personas of young people — one in ten of them face mental health issues themselves — who exhibited a range of behaviours in relation to the campaign, like “reactive supporter” or “unconscious discriminator”.

She made a map of how they might progress through a spectrum of understanding mental health as an issue, or actively supporting the campaign. She showed us her “shitty first draft” of this, and then also showed some of the work she’d done cutting up and organising bits of paper to map potential journeys of understanding for each of the personas.



Chris really sold working with paper and scissors – "Post-it notes never gets old" she said. "Mapping this stuff is messy," she added, and she urged the audience to push bits of paper around on a canvas as big as you needed to really allow yourself to think freely about potential solutions to a problem. She said all too often we get in front of our computers and "put the technology in the way of what we are trying to solve."



Their map showed users with more engagement with the campaign on one axis, and with more knowledge and experience of mental issues on the other. They then had a moment when they realised that actually, this was their content map. Every step along those journeys for each of those personas needed content to support them. For example, the "unconscious discriminator" needed some fundamentals about "what is mental health?" that the grown-up bits of the site assumed everybody already had understood.

One worry with the project was actually reaching the right young people. Firstly there were persona types, the "conscious discriminator" who it was impossible to research with. And young people, Chris reminded us, have a highly developed "cringe barometer". In research they express the desire that something be built for them, but also the view that most things that adults build to appeal to their age group are utterly cringe-inducing.

I had a sudden horrible flashback to a moment a couple of weeks ago when someone I'm working with and I realised that on a particular project we were the equivalent of Radio One's middle managers — desperately trying to design a service that would appeal to "the youth of today" whilst being decidedly 40-something. I need to commission more "cringe-factor" research.

"Whoa Nellie! Content Strategy for Slow Experiences" – Margot Bloomstein

The centre-piece of Margot Bloomstein's argument for "slow content" was a photo of people waiting in a line to go on an attraction sponsored by Chevrolet. Rather than being bored waiting in the line, it looks like they are having a great time, taking photos, and getting to learn about the design of cars through interactive tools. Making the wait fun and enjoyable means they don't really notice how long they queue. The pre-ride is probably as memorable as the ride.

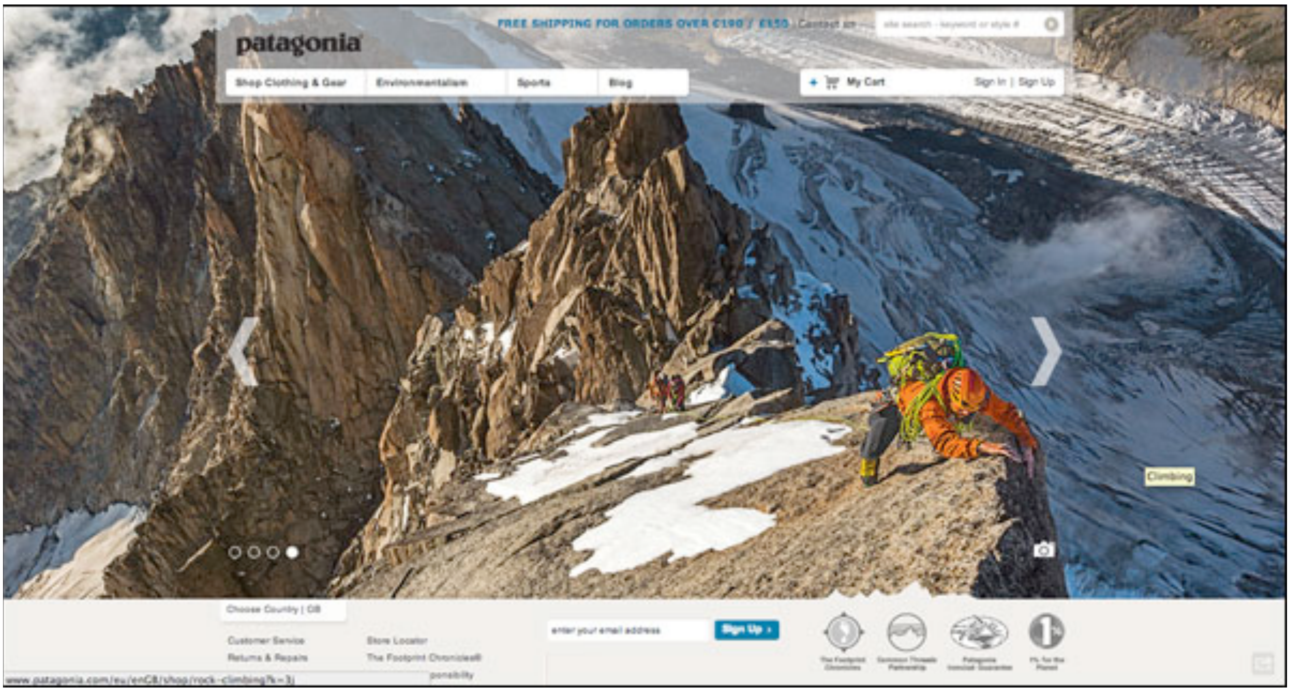
Margot then went on to quote Jared Spool's observation that if people have had a frustrating time during ecommerce, they rate the checkout process as slow. Margot posed the question, if great digital user experiences stop us noticing the time we spend queuing, and frustrating digital experiences make us think things are slow, does it follow that every slow digital user experience must be frustrating?

The answer, she said, was a resounding no. We are long past the years when people said nobody would read on the internet or on mobile, and long-from journalism, ebook singles, and various other developments have proved that longer-lasting content experiences can be made enjoyable and viable.

She compared the Amazon check-out process with that belonging to outdoor clothing brand Patagonia. Amazon hurries you through. There is one-click shopping, and all your default choices are saved. They send you a nagging email if you leave stuff in your basket without checking all the way out. Margot says lots of people must make mistakes, as if you try and report that you've made an error ordering, Amazon list a drop-down with "lots of ways to tell them what you got wrong." A company like Amazon, Margot reasoned, wouldn't engineer those solutions if there wasn't a demand. Haste makes people make errors.

By contrast, Patagonia practically beg you not to buy. Ethical responsibility is part of their brand, the idea of people buying less stuff, but making sure it is the right stuff. At the point of checkout they break all the ecommerce rules by checking you don't want alternative products instead, and really get you to focus on whether you've picked the right size and colours. Their argument is that they'd rather have some cart abandons, than have to ship and process lots of returns because of the carbon footprint involved.

Margot illustrated another way that Patagonia aimed for a long-term slow relationship with the customer through content. When you land on their website, you don't get a list of products. They show you a mountain.



They don’t stock mountains, but they do stock the gear that would allow you to get a breath-taking view like this. They aren’t selling products, they are selling an experience to you. And they start by showing you the experience, not the products.

The also have content that is aimed at their customers, but which isn’t a brochure. Essays on their environmentalism section don’t end with “And that is why you should buy product X”, they standalone as content. You just happen to be on a site where products are a couple of clicks away if the blog has reminded you that you were thinking of replacing you hiking boots. It is a very interesting form of “brand content” or “content marketing”, a topic currently vexing a lot of people in the digital journalism space.

“Content is easy, People are messy: The new rules of writing for the web” – Sally Bagshaw

Now, having a talk with “writing for the web” in the title does somewhat contradict the message elsewhere at Confab that there is no such thing as writing for the web/mobile/internet-enabled fridge screen, there is just good writing. But Sally Bagshaw was delivering a lot more than a list blog post saying profound things like “Punctuation is important on mobile phones”, although she did have a list.

Sally was out-lining a set of principles that will hold us in good stead as we move to a world that requires the production of more structured content. “The desktop is no longer the prime source of truth,” she said, “and we have to start breaking our content down from these massive pages into smaller flexible units.”

The rise of the CMS has meant the demise of centralised editorial control for a lot of organisations. Those teams of content experts used to keep everything on-brand, tight and meaningful. With so much devolved publishing, you get some people who are great, but there is a proliferation of junk. When Kristina Halvorson was talking about our websites being full of accrued years of “land-fill”, a lot of that would have been generated by junior members of staff without much training in writing, and with very little incentive to ever go back and re-visit the content they had published.

WYSIWYG is the spawn of the devil

Sally also had some unkind words to say about the WYSIWYG editor. Well, not entirely unkind. She pointed out that we’d almost certainly all worked on a couple of CMS projects where telling people “It is easy, you won’t need lots of expensive training, it works just like Word” was the only way we got the project over the line and out the door. But, she insists, we have to get away from this old “publish” method and a reliance on the “preview” button.

The Guardian CMS actually had two preview modes. One was a preview, which was an approximation of how the page would look, but included lots of interesting CMS cruft like where empty editable slots were. And then there was “True preview”, which was an approximation of how the page would look, with slightly less bits of CMS cruft. Neither view was ultimately like looking at the Guardian website on anything other than Firefox on a Mac with a giant glossy monitor, and crucially, didn’t tell the journalist or editor if they had included components that might not work on a phone or tablet. It also encouraged staff to manually insert
 tags into headlines, to make them space out nicely on their screens, oblivious to the impact this had on the paper’s mobile site or apps.

Sally Bagshaw defined the real problem here — “Content is easy, people are messy.” And she said something that sounded quite lovely to my geeky ears

— that people care about metadata again. After a brief flurry of interest when you could use the meta keywords tag to spam search engines, metadata has been mostly unloved except by the nerdiest of IAs and content strategists. No longer. “Metadata is the new art direction” as Ethan Resnick put it.

Why? Because the flexibility we need to publish across multiple devices requires structure. And that structure is metadata.

The new rules of web writing

Sally went on to make clear her rules for web writing. Firstly, don’t just talk to the people who work on the CMS. Everybody in a businesses is making content, whether it is the sales team hacking together personalised pitch sheets from existing material, or the call centre folk making fact sheets and notes to help them answer calls. Everybody should get a chance to understand how they could make better content.

Secondly, Sally said that somebody has to be in charge. Erin Scime defined this person as a “content czar”. They need to be across taxonomy and metadata, and be the line of communication between editorial requirements and IT implementation of publishing.

Mind your verbs

Sally Bagshaw then had two suggestions for improving style for a multi-channel world. “Mind your verbs” was one. Avoid terms like “hover”, “pinch”, “click”, “tap” as you don’t know what device your content will be viewed on. I’ve noted myself that “click here” is going to turn out to be a generational marker, and I see that Cennydd Bowles has come out in favour of using the word “select” for these use cases. At Confab, Sally suggested it won’t be long before our copy is littered with commands to “blink” or “wink” to do something, which generated what sounded like nervous laughter in the audience. Nervous, I guess, because it sounded all too likely, and called to my mind a horrifying vision. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a cross-platform content migration project full of device-specific micro-copy stamping on a human face — forever.

Define style at the micro-level

Sally also made a great point about defining style at a micro-level. Many of our webpages are now drawn together from components littered all over the web — our latest tweets, the titles of videos from our YouTube channel, a list of blog titles written by multiple authors from a range of business units. Making those all look coherent and consistent on the page means making them consistent at the point of authorship. And Sally put in a plea for the humble <a href> tag. Links and headlines, she said, are still "the ultimate decision-makers" for users, so get them right.

"Utility, inspiration, empathy – three keys to successful brand content" – Ann Handley

With my journalism hat on, Ann Handley's closing keynote at Confab was fascinating. Her background is having gone from journalism at the Boston Globe, to being an influential voice in the content and marketing spheres. And I've taken great pains to put an and in between those two words.

She thinks content strategist have an amazing opportunity at the moment to really get into businesses and sell their skills, and wanted to share some of the key things she has learned along the way. Not least of which is that good content is not story-telling, but that good content tells a true story well.

Ann also said that good content is customer-centric not corporate-centric. I then had a slightly odd experience, because Ann made a comparison between journalists and marketeers, and argued that journalists were so much better at having a focus on their audience rather than just trying to write clever marketing messages that please the CEO. With years behind me of continually trying to get more user-centred design and user experience-driven product processes into news businesses, it is very easy for me to forget how much journalists do focus on serving an audience. So Ann's point felt a useful reminder, and it was really nice to be sitting there thinking "Fuck yeah! I'm on team journalism!"

On the other side of the coin, at one point Ann said that during her career she "did all kinds of anything to make a buck, anybody who would pay me to write". I think that is something that professional journalists who are lucky to have a berth on the good ship big-old-media-brand at the moment can forget as they decry the people who work for BuzzFeed or HuffPo or trade magazines or as PRs or who write advertorial or "brand journalism".

Talking of which, Ann then went on to give a couple of interesting examples of "brand journalism". One was Openview Labs. This is a whole site built around helping young companies grow. The people behind it do sell software, but you wouldn't necessarily know that from the site, which is packed with helpful information regardless of whether you are a client or not. Interestingly, their editorial staff includes a role for a "curator", whose job it is to make sure they are linking out and carrying the best external content on the topic, and a "syndicator" making sure that their original content is getting the best distribution. As part of a small editorial team those roles take on much more importance than they have in bigger, more traditional journalism houses, where editors and reporters are going to outnumber SEO, social media and community people by some factor.

The other example Ann gave that caught my eye was Kinvey's decision to give away an ebook about how to make an Android app, that included step-by-step code snippets to get you going. That might seem like under-cutting the business service they actually provide, but Ann explained the rationale. The book, whilst not perhaps being the best get started tutorial guide ever written, clearly demonstrated that they knew how to make apps too. 25% of their business leads in a single quarter were generated off the back of the free ebook.

The main lesson from the talk was that if you wanted to become a brand that was consistently associated with good content, then you needed to constantly "create and share information that is packed with utility, seeded with inspiration, and honestly empathetic."

She reminded us all that "publishing is a privilege." Nobody, she said, is forced to read our content or respect us. You want people to come to you for content because they love you and your content, even if, she said, you sell something "super-boring like software or shovels."

“The Editor Behind the Curtain” – Erin Kissane

Erin Kissane’s talk title referenced The Wizard of Oz, one of my little daughter’s favourite movies, so how could I not love it? Especially when she revealed a sub-plot of how having an editorial strategy will help save your ass and find your way during a period of rapid change. Erin doesn’t doubt we are in a period of rapid change, or as she put it, “shiny new stuff is always appearing.”

I love shiny new stuff, me. But Erin pointed out that most organisations or people can do three things with “shiny new stuff”. They “deride and ignore”, y’know the iPad is lame or Twittr will never catch on. Or they “embrace unquestioningly”. Or they take a moment to work out what is helpful and use what matters.

Unsurprisingly Erin urged us to be in the latter camp, and think about the roots of “editorial strategy”. Editorial is not, she said, about the red pen, about being a stickler, about obsessing over syntax. And editorial is not only style, voice or tone. She said she prefers to think about it as “steering the ship” — not the actions of one person at the helm, or one navigator, or one person in the engine room, but a combination of them under guidance that will keep the whole ship heading in the right direction during a storm.

Erin then went on to talk about her experiences recently working with data-journalists, and I had one of those crash-zoom moments where in a room with a couple of hundred people only a handful put their hand up to say they knew what data-journalism was. In the same way that I’d wager a room full of 200 data-journalists would struggle to know what “content strategy” was. For a few brief seconds I felt like I was literally at the centre of a really nerdy Venn diagram.

Erin described data-journalists as “people who live and breathe data” in order to extract stories from it. She thinks there are some useful things to be gained from the practice by content strategist because, she said, we do have an awful lot of data, and we are going to get even more. Content strategists might think of themselves as “word people”, but Erin reminded us that we use content score-cards and spreadsheets and analytics and user-testing groups, and that this is all data. The promise of data, she said, is that we want to get closer to our users, and knowing more about their behaviour should help us to help them.

But she also cautioned against the “hypnosis” of data. That because we have numbers we treat them as objectively true, even though any set of numbers will be biased by what we could collect, and why we chose to collect it in that way. A real risk is that we have some data, and so then we ask some questions of what we’ve got, without expanding our horizons. It is much better to ask important questions, and then seek out the data that will answer them. Sticking to datasets you already have also means potentially missing out on stories, connections, and different interpretations.

And numbers don’t tell the whole story. She mentioned one particular website that occasionally sends massive traffic spikes to a project she works on. The load makes the server guy sweat, she explained, but since the audience of that website are not their target market, it isn’t actually of any use to them, even though the raw server log numbers would suggest “Brilliant, loads of traffic, we’re doing great.”

Without naming names, Erin also suggested that some content strategy practitioners were selling their content scoring methods as “scientific” when actually they were “some dude in a basement putting numbers in a spreadsheet read off some post-it notes.” Numbers in this context are a convenience, not a rigourous thing from on high. It was, she said, all too tempting sometimes to try and prove a case to a client by blinding them with numbers rather than really saying “here is how we evaluated this” and actually taking them through the reasoning.

Erin said we risk falling for “a wish or desire to mechanise human judgement” or “the longing we have to replace the dirty messy human stuff with this crystalline new structure of data”, but there were strong positives for content strategists. We should be looking to automate what can be automated, and use machines and data to build tools and rules that support editorial judgement. I always think that a great CMS is one that captures every bit of human input that has gone into the editing process — how long was this on the homepage, did it go in a big image slot for strong photo-stories, was it linked to by a lot of other articles, that sort of data.

Data can be a great ally for content strategists, Erin explained, but only by sticking to our editorial roots. What are we trying to accomplish with this piece of content? And for whom? Numbers can help us measure whether we are achieving those goals, but they can’t tell us everything.

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About the author

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About Emblem

Emblem is a digital consultancy offering user experience design and training services. We work with organisations and start-ups in the publishing, media, arts, heritage and culture sectors. Clients include the BBC, Guardian, Trinity Mirror, Arts Council England, the Natural History Museum and the Imperial War Museum.

At Emblem we work differently. We don't concentrate on hourly billing, producing glossy presentations, or ticking boxes for the sake of it. We concentrate on your audience. We work with you to solve actual problems, and we help you put the user right at the heart of your digital products and services.

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