

The Digital Public Space

What it is, why it matters and
how we can all help develop it.

Speech by

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Good morning and thank you very much for inviting me here to speak with you today.

My name is Tony Ageh and I am the Controller of Archive Development at the BBC in the UK. My role there came about as the result of what sounds like a pretty straightforward question: In the age of On Demand television and radio, what should the BBC do with its vast and priceless archives?

However before too long I realised that the question itself, as it was framed, wasn't quite right. A better question might have been "What is the most we could possibly achieve by making use of our vast and priceless archives?" to which the answer is something like:

Remind ourselves of all that the BBC has achieved to date and position it appropriately for the Digital Age and, in doing so, stimulate the creative industries to inspire innovation and deliver growth throughout our economies.

In the next 30 minutes or so I will attempt to give you an insight into how I arrived at such a modest answer.

Like any good speaker, I started to prepare for my talk by reading the introductory text on the conference website:

“The true potential of digitised public media collections is unlocked when seamless forms of public and professional access to these materials is enabled both on-line and on-site at the holders of these collections. Online public access enables unprecedented circulation of materials, makes invaluable contributions to public education, and stimulates vibrant cultural processes, particularly when materials can be actively reused. Professionals on the other hand require access to high quality media source materials and reliable documentation resources. Providing digital media resources that meet the demands of the public and the professionals transforms these media collections into invaluable productive resources”.

So far so good. It then goes on to say:

“The main challenge here is how to meet the material, institutional, and economic demands that result from this

historical opportunity in a time where public funding is under severe pressure”.

Now of course that is correct – the challenge is to solve all of the problems that prevent us from creating the maximum possible opportunities for the largest possible number of people using the widest possible range of resources, to deliver previously unimaginable economic and public value. Oh, and without requiring any significant investment of additional public resources or public money. Not entirely impossible *in theory* but in practice certainly non-trivial.

But I have personally found that there is actually a far greater challenge than even these – the problem of simply persuading those who stand in our way to let us get on with it.

And here’s the most frustrating aspect of that challenge – those who would benefit most from the outcomes are the very same parties who are most stubbornly both resisting the transformation of everything we currently know and do, and preventing the creation of an unimaginable variety of new

ideas, activities and benefits for all, still waiting to be discovered, invented or produced.

And when I use the term ‘everything’ it is because I am yet to discover anything that would not be somehow affected

So from where I stand, the main challenge is being allowed to start. And please don’t urge me to seek forgiveness not permission any more – I’m using up a fair amount of ‘forgiveness’ by even daring to come here and talk to you like this today.

There is a saying that ‘in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is king’. In my experience it doesn’t work out quite that way. In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is simply never believed. I suspect I am standing in a room filled with people, who have a pretty clear view of what the future *could* look like but are finding it harder and harder to make their vision believable enough, tangible enough or achievable in the short-term enough to satisfy the blind requirements of their fiscal overlords.

Worse – it often seems that the more optimistic the vision, the more apoplectic the reaction. The one glimmer of hope is that those who are standing in the way, and some of them are people in leadership positions, must eventually be gone. Like those who once resisted “talking pictures”, the trend is not in their favour. They can either embrace the inevitable or wait for it to bypass them but they cannot stop it from happening. Even the protagonist of the movie ‘The Artist’ eventually acknowledged and embraced the inevitable. Better still, instead of causing delay, they should be striving to offer the earliest opportunity for the next generation, to start undoing the mess that has been made of practically everything, by the current generation.

Anyway, for today at least, I’d like to share with you my personal contribution to that our shared vision along with some believable, tangible and achievable steps that we can take, collectively and in collaboration, to start to deliver the benefits we know to be within reach of everyone – whether they want us to or not.

To start with, let me get one thing out of the way... the name. This ‘Digital Public Space’. I came up with it a couple of years ago as a shorthand for an online environment that would have all the features we believed were necessary to deliver our aspirations for the archives of the BBC and other cultural institutions, and it seems to have stuck.

William Shakespeare famously asked “What’s in a name?” and to a degree he is, of course, still right: A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. However deciding what to call an abstract concept in order to describe it to someone who is already predisposed not to want it, is a tricky thing to get right.

First off, in order to reinforce their own misunderstanding they are inclined to attach literal, and often physical, rather than just the metaphorical attributes the name was intended to convey. Secondly there is a risk that the entire concept will very quickly be reduced down to a three-letter acronym – in this case ‘DPS’ – that strips out all-important subtlety and context and meaning.

I've got admit I was warned more than once that this would happen by my old boss RK, who was at the time on the BDG at the BBC and is now the CEO at the BL. Anyway, as I say, the term now seems to have stuck. Digital Public Space. It kind of doesn't matter but it kind of does.

I admit it doesn't roll off the tongue or confer absolute clarity of purpose but then again the term World Wide Web took some getting used to and is still being mistaken for the 'Internet', even today, by a great many people who should know better, in particular those who most seek to control or regulate the usage and the users of both.

Ok then so what *does* it mean? Well I say 'Digital' because that's what started the whole revolution off... a revolution first expressed as Organisational and Institutional Possibility and now in Public Expectation.

And the term Public means just that. Well, actually, on further thought, it means more than *just* that, because of course the Internet and also the Web are both – in theory at least – public. The issue, however, is that their complete lack of controls –

the inherent neutrality of the internet and the web – can sometimes work for the public’s best interests, and sometimes against them. So that’s specifically how I’m using the term Public – on behalf of, and always and only in the best interests of, the Public.

And here I want to emphasize clearly, that when I say the public’s best interests I’m not excluding profit-making enterprises. But I do mean an environment that enables individuals, organisations and companies of every kind – not just a few big ones – to build value, contributing to the greater good of nations as a whole. It would make the vast archival wealth of nations – our Collective Abundance – here in Europe and well beyond, accessible. It would permit, encourage and even require contributions from the whole of our society. It will be a place where conversation thrives, where all contributions are welcomed and where every story, no matter who tells it, has value.

So that’s ‘Digital’ and ‘Public’. And then there’s Space: A word that means everything and nothing. The smallest of gaps and an expanse of eternity. An unlimited realm or a

momentary lapse. Everything there ever was and yet nothing to see. It seemed to fit.

Now I know that some of my colleagues are already at the point of thoroughly disliking the term Digital Public Space, not least because it creates the impression that it will become a tangible – perhaps even controllable – thing, rather than convey what it **really** is – which is an arrangement of shared technologies, standards and processes that will be collaboratively developed and commonly applied, to deliver a set of principles, objectives and purposes against which collective enterprise can be evaluated. Just like the Internet and also the Web.

So, and solely for the avoidance of doubt, we will never have a service or a box or a website or a building that we can point to and say “that thing there, that’s the Digital Public Space”: the concept of the digital public space is an ‘agenda’ and a variety of specific initiatives that are purposefully consistent with that ‘agenda’ – sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

It is also, and crucially, not an alternative to the Web but something that emerges from the full and proper application of Web technologies, current and under development, to address the problems that face organisations and individuals that want to share their digitised assets in a structured way.

To put it another way: if I spoke about a project and described it as being “very public service”, you’d probably have a fair inkling of what I meant by that, even if you weren't sure of the specifics; We will have succeeded when we arrive at a point of understanding where the same applies to the Digital Public Space.

From the perspective of the BBC in particular, just as we didn't *create* broadcasting, we did to a significant degree engineer it and shape it and cultivate it – the equivalent shaping of the thing we're today calling the “Digital Public Space” will be to bring about a roadmap or a blueprint for an emerging digital environment, whose defining characteristics are openness, persistence, engagement, partnerships, access and public benefit.

As we are all too aware, ‘Digital’ changes everything it touches, usually in quite fundamental ways. The BBC is no exception. Let me describe from my own perspective, two of the more significant ways it impacts upon the Corporation.

First, there’s the issue of permanence. With our new-found abundance comes a corresponding end of scarcity. Things no longer ‘need’ to disappear after a certain period of time.

Material that once would have flourished only briefly before languishing under lock and key or even being thrown away — can now be made available forever. And our Licence Fee Payers increasingly expect this to be the way of things. We will soon need to have a very, *very* good reason for why anything at all disappears from view or is not permanently accessible in some way or other.

That is why the Digital Public Space has placed the continuing and permanent availability of all publicly-funded media, and its associated information, as the default and founding principle.

As a founding principle this should be reasonably straightforward for any participating organisation to sign up to. Unless it is impossible to do otherwise – once published keep it available. Because once it can be taken for granted that an item or asset will forever persist, then everything else becomes possible.

There are, of course, many complex issues that must be addressed and resolved before the system can offer a frictionless interchange between participating organisations. You can probably already list them – my top ten has: consistent cataloguing; data mapping; rights frameworks, both moral and commercial; geographic and chronological tagging; authentication – both of individuals as well as assets; provenance; image permanence; and so on.

Trying to solve any of these in isolation is probably harder than any single organisation could do on its own. Solving them all, and in a joined-up way, will only be achieved by collaboration across institutional boundaries and international borders.

In the UK the search for some of these solutions may have started within the BBC but we soon embraced partners including Arts Council England, the British Film Institute, the British Library, The National Archives, The Joint Information Systems Committee (or JISC) and a number of other libraries, archives and memory institutions. All of us beginning to appreciate that, particularly in this so-called Age of Austerity, in order to realise the benefits of an ‘economy of sharing’ we will have to collectively share not only our assets but also our knowledge, our resources and our experiences.

And the BBC is an international broadcaster, so our partners are not limited to the UK. We’ve talked to the European Commission in Brussels and in particular to our friends at Europeana, we’ve got conversations going on with potential partners in Australia, and there’s a genuine recognition in America that such an approach has the capacity to help drive growth across the creative economy. Yes, of course, there are very significant challenges around funding in the current adverse economic environment – particularly in the Eurozone, but that simply gives us more reason to explore common purpose not less.

And yes, of course, there are big issues around rights which we need to tackle. We want a rights settlement which genuinely works for all public institutions – and certainly for educational institutions – but which also creates a coincidence of interests with financiers on behalf of – not to the detriment of – **all** rights owners. And again let me be precise here – I mean in particular those who **create** the value, not simply those who trade in it. Of course **the traders** must also be heard and appropriately rewarded for their efforts but let us also remember this would not be the first time those who manipulate such trades have been ‘asked’ to leave the temple.

It would, of course, be absurd to pretend that any of this is easy or that it is going to be achieved quickly. But that is precisely why partnership, one involving the broadest possible coalition, with partners from all over the world, is so key – it is only by working together that we can possibly deliver on our ambitions at scale.

The second big challenge that the Digital world, and in particular the internet, presents to the BBC is that it can no

longer guarantee through the licence fee alone, affordable, universal access to high quality, impartial and independent media – free at the point of use. Which is the thing the Licence Fee is actually for.

Now this is a thorny issue and could easily be the subject of an entire speech of its own but to put the issue in context, let me take you back to the origins of the BBC.

It was the BBC's aspiration from the beginning to be not merely universal but available equally to all, that set it apart. From the outset, Lord Reith and his fellow architects of the Corporation understood the need to ensure that the benefits of the medium could be shared by every single citizen of the UK. In his own words, our mission was “To bring the best of everything to the greatest number of homes”.

Alongside this, they designed the BBC so that it would be largely be free from direct political or commercial considerations. The BBC created the capacity to reach everyone in the UK, wherever they were and at the same moment in time. To ensure an equivalence of opportunity –

regardless of status or income or doctrine or ability – to be informed, educated, entertained.

And far, far more importantly, it placed no conditions whatsoever on what you, or anyone else, were supposed to do or feel as a direct or indirect result. Each and every one of us has an equal right to feel motivated or mollified by what we see and hear. To feel insulted or inspired by whatever is broadcast. To emulate or to ignore. To quote from memory or to take copious notes. To tell your friends as much or as little as you feel inclined to recall. To ‘cherry pick’ ideas as the basis of your own creativity. To parody in private or to paraphrase in public.

In the language of today, it was intentionally there to be reused – mashed up, hacked and re-wired.

The recognised potential of the broadcast medium from the very outset was to transform society and every single person within it. To sustain citizenship and civil society, to promote education and learning, to stimulate creativity and cultural excellence, to represent the UK, its nations and its regions and

its communities, to bring the world to the UK and the UK to the world. And in achieving all of these the BBC would ‘deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services’.

What therefore made the BBC unique for its time was that commitment to impact Everyone. The ubiquity of the broadcast medium was – in part – the message.

The BBC was at first available only in the UK, but it very quickly reached out to the world – the Empire Service began in 1932 and became the Overseas Service in 1939 and the World Service in 1965.

Before the advent of the Internet as a distribution channel all anybody needed, to receive broadcast programmes, was access to a suitable receiving device – in the first instance a radio, later a television set – and some form of electricity, in order to be connected to the electronic publishing network that brought them an unmetered (repeat, unmetered) supply of information, education and entertainment.

The Internet is changing all of that.

Now a receiving device – whether it's a PC, an iPad, a smartphone or some other device – plus some electricity, is nowhere near enough to secure access of any type. Access to the theoretically public internet, and the World Wide Web that sits upon, it is increasingly controlled by a wide array of intermediaries and their enforcement agents. It's often conditional and mostly charged for.

And even then there is no guarantee that your own specific combination of hardware, software, ISP, identity assurance provider, user tariff, geographic location, record of previous behaviour or future credit rating will permit you to see your own photos, listen to a new song, send a video to your friend whether they're in Amsterdam or Adelaide. My own recent upgrade to Apple's IOS6 has left my iPad – a closed device if ever there was one – unable to any longer connect to my home Wi-Fi, making it impossible to access the internet and therefore a useless waste of money.

And in addition to the complexity of accessing material, something else has fundamentally changed too, especially since the advent of businesses created to exploit the so called social dimensions of Web 2.0. – The machines are watching us more than we are watching them.

Until the digital age, viewing, listening or even just thinking out loud, were largely unrecorded activities mainly within the control of the individual. Anonymity and serendipity were features not bugs!

However what also contributes to the National Abundance of ‘creative content’ that so many institutions are currently warehousing, is what you might call ‘attention data’ – personal information. The trace of private individuals as they traverse the digital world. Things you do and things you say and things you’d like to know about yourself, but don’t necessarily want to share with others.

Some of this is held by public bodies, some held by commercial businesses. Everything from your school reports to your health records. Your pictures, your videos and your

tweets. What you've bought. Where you've been. Who you've seen. Your likes and dislikes. Your personal history as understood by you from the bottom up.

In the current online world, personal data are no longer considered as belonging to the individual. Instead they are treated as freely acquired assets to be retained and traded by commercial organisations, regardless of the value taken from, or subsequently accruing to, the individual originator of that data.

But if the Digital Public Space is to really work effectively, then we'll need to ensure that people and their data are respected and secure. That people are happy to make their personal data available, so it can be used, repurposed, remixed. That they can change their minds with confidence, after the event, without cost or penalty or personal distress. They must be certain at all times that their data are treated exactly as they would wish it to be. No ifs no buts.

To achieve what we have in mind will take a collaborative effort, on a global level, between all interested parties to

organise their currently disorganised resources around a common purpose. Bottom up rather than top down. I think this is our best shot at ensuring that the benefits of the emerging communications technologies are maximised and delivered to all of us as citizens – regardless of race, orientation, creed, mobility, location, ability to pay, or how we access the internet.

Whichever route we take, the organising force behind the Digital Public Space must have the trust and confidence of the public that it serves and it must deliver on enduring, non-negotiable commitments to transparency, accountability and independence. It should decentralise rather than control. It must be based on the principles of openness and shared development rather than proprietary and closed systems. It should create a legacy for the future measured not in years, but in decades and more.

To my mind, these are the core components of the ‘organisation of resources’ that needs to be at the heart of an open, accessible, Digital Public Space.

Pulling this all together then, the first two things that the Digital Public Space would be built upon are:

First, an ever expanding store of permanently accessible digital media and its supporting data – along with appropriate policies, protocols and conditions to enable its widest possible use and second, the guarantee of universally equivalent, public access for all, through an appropriately managed environment to facilitate discovery, retrieval, consumption, critique, correction, augmentation and creative endeavour.

I believe that this could power a whole new economy and assure us all here in Europe of a continuing role in the digital world of the future. Our public sectors own or control a wealth of assets which have been built up over many decades, centuries even. This is quite different from the situation in some places outside of the EU, in the United States for example where the public sector has always been subordinate to the private sector. And, to state the blindingly obvious, the US does not have historical artefacts reaching back over many centuries in the way that we do.

The assets we hold in Europe have a number of distinctive characteristics:

- There are an awful lot of them. In the UK, for example, we have over 2,500 museums and galleries – many of which maintain unique and irreplaceable archives and libraries. Yet very few have access to the people with the digital skills or the resources to liberate their value – either for paid or for unpaid access. And apart from our 6 National Libraries, there are a further 1,000 academic libraries and over 4,000 public libraries.
- Our assets are still largely in analogue formats. The overwhelming majority of the material we hold in Europe has yet to be digitised. And it is pretty much unimaginable, in this day and age, that there will ever be enough public money to digitise them all or even a significant proportion of them. Although I am aware that work in the film and audio-visual archives here in The Netherlands and also in France have been something of a trailblazer I'm not optimistic that without a real change

of appreciation that many more will follow in the near future.

- Our combined assets incorporate a remarkable diversity of material – ranging from documents to physical objects, from books to films, from paintings to microfiche. From century to century, from nation to nation, from prince and from pauper.
- It's all of high quality and authenticity, collected and catalogued by experts in their field. There's very, very little within our collections that is of no value at all.

I believe that a strategic approach to converting these assets to digital formats, and then developing an ever expanding range of ways to legitimately access and exploit these assets, would create entirely new industries, providing for highly skilled jobs and new opportunities for entrepreneurs. It would have profound implications for how we all, across Europe and beyond, could experience and participate in culture, education and citizenship.

It could drive innovation right across the whole of Europe, helping us to start closing the ever-widening gap with Silicon Valley, and, along the way, opening up previously unimagined worlds of discovery for people of all ages to enjoy.

The reality is that neither the private nor public sector can afford to undertake this all on its own. It has to be done hand in hand, finding a common purpose through shared enterprise. For while the public sector has a great many of the assets, the private sector has a great many other, vital things to offer, things which aren't nearly so freely available in the public sector – capital of course, but also the freedom and desire to innovate.

The key question is this – How?

The over-arching challenge is to create models that are capable of both delivering public value and at the same time providing commercial opportunities.

Here again terminology is very important. I don't think we should be talking about "business models" – that points to a very specific economic interpretation of value. For example, we are not just posting full-length programmes on a website for people to watch as they would do on a television in a living room in order to aggregate units of attention that are translated into a propensity to purchase in the future. The viewer may only need segments and in a non-linear way. A viewer in five years' time may derive far greater value from watching, or listening to a short clip from a particular programme, than someone who watches the whole thing now.

The way we describe and measure value has to change – this may be particularly hard for broadcasters such as the BBC where the whole ethos has historically been based, for television at least, on short-term head count measurements such as overnight viewing figures – and this ethos all too often translates into a desire to measure online activity by similar, short-term yardsticks. For a whole host of reasons this doesn't begin to capture the value that is produced.

Opportunities to create different kinds of value are potentially everywhere. But at the moment this value is trapped. For a start, a huge amount of the material – the assets and their associated information – is currently sitting within inert, analogue formats. Books and photographs, tape and film, pieces of paper in filing cabinets.

Much of the to-ing and fro-ing about whether the internet represents a creation or an erosion of commercial value is pretty much academic until these are all accessible and so digitisation on a mass scale is absolutely imperative as a first step. Some of this is taking place anyway. In the case of the BBC, for example, we've recently completed the task of digitising the complete collection of The Radio Times, more than half of our Radio archive and a substantial percentage of our Television one.

And of course, all of our new output is now entirely digital. The BBC's coverage of the Olympics – rightly acclaimed around the world - was just the start of a journey, not the completion of one.

To open the way to commercial partnerships, here's a short list of challenges that any entrepreneur worth their centimes should relish:

1. How can we deliver mass digitisation when public resources are in very short supply?
2. What kind of material should we prioritise for such mass digitisation and why?
3. What kind of discovery engines do we need? What sort of processes will we need to make all this accessible? How will it be visually presented?
4. How could the commercial sector motivate members of the public to contribute freely, carrying out what can often amount to unpaid commercial activities, without making them feel unrewarded and, worse, exploited?
5. How are we going to recruit and manage a new skilled workforce? What are tomorrow's skills and how might we create the best conditions for them to develop?
6. How can we convince rights owners not to fear this revolution in access but instead to welcome it, demonstrating how they will benefit through increased commercial opportunities?

The potential rewards for success in these areas are huge. We'd gain a digital-dividend of at least four incredibly valuable things.

First, previously inert materials would get put back into the public domain in digital form with value-adding discovery data appended.

Second, skilled People. Not just for the short-term but genuine transferable skills that can be applied to other enterprises beyond our national borders.

Third, opportunities to innovate. The freedom to experiment, the freedom to succeed. Both for commercial gain but also for the public good.

And fourth, a return flow of funding to reinvest in further digitisation and data processing to produce a continuing supply of new material to inspire a virtuous circle of ideas and innovation.

Success must also point the way to a new, appropriate rights framework – one that would allow all of these things to happen without degrading or reducing the absolute value of rights and in many cases increasing them. As I said earlier, this is about working with commercial and public rights holders to maximise long-term value for all.

Many of the solutions we are looking for already exist, in whole or in part, although they are often active only in the isolated operating models of many of our public bodies. If ways can be found to encourage organisations to work collaboratively in the service of common goals, then the rate of adoption and the speed of change could be massively increased.

We can build a new industrial environment. This would have immense benefits for learning at every stage of life, for our shared heritage, for businesses, especially Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, and for the on-going development of informed democracy – helping to make good for future generations what we have made ‘less than good’ for our own .

The kind of change I'm suggesting – driven by bringing existing things together and creating something that is much more than the sum of its parts – has many precedents. For example the invention of moveable type combined with existing components of language, typography, the letter press and dead trees reconstituted as paper, created the print industries. And then we provided universal access to the written word by undertaking wholesale literacy campaigns in order that everyone might benefit from, and participate within, literate society.

So similarly The Digital Public Space has the potential to create both the capability and also a fully participating society, resulting in both commercial returns as well as continually generating new public value.

A wonderful quality of using archive material to start the whole process is that it's freely available, it is wholly representative of the complexity we'll need to resolve before we can apply new rules to whatever we produce from now on and – perhaps best of all – each assets gains greater utility and more value the more it's used and the more connected it is to

other assets and their metadata. The more links there are, the more valuable the whole system becomes. In this way, the benefits start to grow exponentially, rather than just at an incremental rate.

I'd like to conclude with a call-to-action. A challenge, if you like. I want you to go away and think about the possibilities a digital public space opens up for you and the organisations that you represent. Look for ways to collaborate with others and to share resources, problems and solutions.

I'm not asking you to take to the road to become travelling salespeople for this idea... but I have a feeling that if you do go and really think about these possibilities, and you're the sort of person who has come here today and sat and listened to me talk about it for the last half hour, you'd probably want to tell other people whether I asked you to or not.

Because the public, all of us, have the capacity – I would argue, even a duty – to help reinvent our public organisations throughout Europe and across the world in a way that enables

us to use the powers of technology to further the development of democracy, social justice and learning.

I believe that we know better, and deserve better, than the continuing failures of ‘management-posing-as-leadership’ that we have lived through for the past generation-and-a-half.

Where short-termism became the only doctrine. Where the anointed acolytes of what are called ‘markets’ demand a never ending reduction in what are called ‘costs’ in the perpetual pursuit of what are, often fraudulently, called ‘profits’.

Where the fiction of increased efficiency through targets and league tables reduce our Resources and our Craft and our Ambition and our Motivation and our Values and our Beliefs and our Pride... leaving us with little more than a hollow desire to be simply left alone, to do the best we can, with what little we have of that list remaining.

All of us – we can do this, together.

We don’t need permission or forgiveness. Just the belief that we can do better by working together than we could ever

achieve by working apart. To rediscover our shared values and our common purpose. And to find that little bit inside each of us that refuses to accept any longer that the only thing we are on this earth to do is to deliver savings or generate profits.

And in so doing, to create the conditions for a more enlightened future which is shaped not by the self-serving power of a few, but by the generous wisdom of the many.

Thank you very much for your time.