



Accountability through Social Media at the BBC: Executive Summary

Unthinkable Consulting, April 2010

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is structured to set out a series of issues and problems first, and then propose a set of recommendations to address those issues. Those recommendations need not be taken as a package. Indeed, while some are intentionally complementary, others will be alternatives to each other.

For ease of reference, we summarise those recommendations here.

Strategy

We recommend that the BBC formulate a set of strategic objectives around online accountability, and publish it online in the spirit of allowing its licence fee payers to hold it to account. We offer a draft set of objectives for consideration.

Host Better

Much can be improved without changing existing formats and structures, by changing the practice of authors and hosts on accountability blogs. We recommend that blog authors respond at least in part to popular comment threads where new points or questions are being raised. We also recommend greater empathy and consistency from hosts.

Manage Expectations More Clearly

Currently there are widely varying degrees of interaction and response from blog authors and hosts. We recommend that for each blog the BBC should assess the level of likely response from authors and clearly set out an SLA to its users.

Define Accountability

The BBC should decide collectively on a definition of accountability which can be published for the benefit of the audience. This need not be a single dictionary-style definition but could recognise different degrees and varieties of accountability and set out the contexts in which each is appropriate. This definition should inform any strategic objectives.

Publish and Promote Standard FAQs

There should be standard FAQs across BBC blogs, setting out, among other things:

- the purpose of the accountability blogs
- a definition of accountability
- the valid reasons why full and frank responses may sometimes be unforthcoming.

Make Navigation Much Clearer

We recommend a number of steps in this area:

1. Consolidate a central online hub for accountability and promote it and signpost clearly.
2. Create a navigational badge to be carried by all accountability destinations so that they can link to each other and back to the central hub.

3. Audit the existing accountability blogs, and consider whether to cut back, extend or consolidate.
4. For blogs which do not carry accountability responsibilities, clarify their role and communicate to blog owners where to direct accountability issues that arise in their area.
5. Across BBC social media activities, provide staff with a clear place to direct users to tackle accountability questions.

Integrate Deeply with Broadcast

We recommend that the current suite of feedback programmes should be relaunched as fully cross-media brands, using online vehicles to allow users to set the agenda in an open fashion and integrating with current interactive offerings. Further:

- Allow users an opportunity to set the agenda within these spaces by filtering and promoting each other's contributions and ideas
- Build a model of "networked accountability" around these brands by cultivating panels of audience experts
- Transfer the "audience representative" role and powers enjoyed by presenters of feedback programmes to online hosts

Give Users Control of the Accountability Agenda

We recommend that the BBC take seriously the idea that the accountability should be driven by the audience – allowing licence fee payers in effect to hold the BBC to account. This should be facilitated either by the adoption of new technical platforms and/or by the definition of clear ombudsman-style powers for blog hosts.

Commission User Research

The BBC needs to understand, on an ongoing basis, the demographic biases of contributors to different accountability platforms, in order to take them as seriously as they deserve and to make any allowances for how this might distort the picture of user views.

Increase Ownership of Senior Management

There needs to be a culture change inside the BBC such that it becomes an accepted and expected part of the job of senior editorial management to read online social media output associated with their linear brands, as well as being aware of the competition.

Engage Outside bbc.co.uk

We recommend that the BBC should consider to what extent conversations which are now conducted on bbc.co.uk could be conducted externally instead. Regardless of the outcome, the BBC also needs to spend more time reading and engaging with online commentary around itself and its brands.

Empower a Central Team

We recommend explicitly charging a team with supporting social media activities around accountability, trained to be aware of recurring issues and able to support blog authors and production staff and able to step in as hosts where necessary.

Tighten up Complaints Process

We recommend that:

1. Complaints concerning the content of comments on blogs or messageboards be handled by the Editorial Complaints Unit.
2. The Social Media Complaints Board commit itself publically to a maximum response time.