

THE 2008 MIDDLETON MEMORIAL LECTURE*

**NEW WAYS TO COMMUNICATE: THE DEVELOPMENT
OF WEB 2.0 AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Heather Gorringe

Heather Gorringe reports on the results of her 2007 Nuffield Scholarship studying 'The Development of the Web and Social Media' Her message is : "Your children, your customers, your suppliers, your advocates and your enemies are already there – they are online now. Find out why you need to embrace the generation of the Web"

Key words Internet, Web 2.0, viral marketing, social media

My Disclaimer:

I am not a techy, or a geek.

I don't know how your computer works.

I don't know how to sort out your hard drive, or hook up your Blackberry.

But I do know this:

You don't need to know any of those things to benefit from my report.

You just need an open mind.

Background

In 2007 I was awarded a Nuffield Farming Scholarship. Nuffield Scholarships enable enthusiastic individuals, who are 45 years old or under, to explore topics of their choice in agriculture, land management, horticulture or the food chain. They do this by helping the Scholar to:

- achieve personal development through study and travel
- stand back from their day-to-day occupation and study a topic of real interest to them
- access the world's best in food and farming
- deliver benefits to UK farmers and growers, and to the industry as a whole

Funded by the agriculture and food industry, charities with agricultural objectives and past Scholars themselves, the Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust awards around 20 new Scholarships each. The aim of my Nuffield study tour was to take a look at some of the people and companies using the most recent internet developments and see if what they are using could be utilised successfully by farmers and rural businesses just like me. I wanted to connect in real life with bloggers and podcasters, and people using Facebook and Twitter, and understand why and how they were using these tools.

I ended up studying a communication revolution that is changing the world we live in day by day. The tools used today may change tomorrow, but they

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are enabling more and more efficient ways of communication by allowing people to share ideas and information and to collaborate with others of like mind without formality and without government, corporate, or mass media intervention or influence.

This is not about whether you have a computer – in fact in India mobile communication will leapfrog the need for conventional broadband access. This is about whether you are web savvy, and online. Looking over the precipice to Web 2.0 and Web 3.0....in those time honoured lyrics of the Randy Bachman song...

“B-, b-, b-, baby, you just ain't seen na-, na-, nothin yet.”

For the farmer or the business person to say he is not online is the equivalent of him saying he cannot drive and does not have access to a telephone. *How many farmers and business people do you know who cannot drive and do not have a telephone?*

Having no formal qualifications (unless you are happy to accept an art A-level and a design diploma) my path was pretty much laid out for me. I was expected to work for my father's drainage contracting business, which I did for several years. However, having two brothers 16½ years older than me, I found it difficult to forge a role within the company that would deliver self-fulfilment along with value to the family business.

So whilst I cut my teeth driving a drainage machine, I was always looking for an escape route. I wanted to build my own business just like my Dad had in his time. I was out to prove something! (In hindsight I cannot say what for sure!)

After a hesitant start Wiggly Wigglers came to life supplying one of the UK's first ever worm composting kits, to recycle kitchen waste. I soon learnt that to survive I needed to create a market, not just fill one, and to do that I needed to create my own stories and interest.

The population of my village, Blakemere, is 63, with no major towns nearby, so the internet was the obvious route for my business. It now accounts for well over 50% of our sales. I found it reasonably easy to connect with the consumer as I was one, and 'she' was pretty similar to me.

'She', like me, did not particularly trust farmers and had virtually no positive views on agriculture. Despite growing up in the countryside and working on farms first as a contractor and later with our own sheep, my views on general farming were pretty negative, and gleaned through disease or subsidy reports in the national press.

Having married a farmer, our main marital issue was the argument between organic and conventional, which we aired on a regular basis (and still do). As we all know, with open discussion comes understanding which can then lead to collaboration and improvements and changes from both sides.

So it was then that I came to my 'Eureka' moment

In June 2005 I found out about podcasts. A podcast is an internet radio

show that you can subscribe to. Subscribing means that the radio show lands regularly on whatever device you listen to it on, without any more effort needed, and so obviously potentially it had longevity and a global reach.

In September 2005 Wiggly Wigglers dived in and produced a podcast. It was one of the first ever gardening and farming podcasts in the world and needed no licence and very little spend.

It was from this moment that I took a peek out from my Wiggly World and caught a glimpse of the possibilities for the next generation of internet (the so called Web 2.0). I wanted to find out what it really offered.

My Study Tour : the Virtual Journey and the Real One

I travelled up the Pacific Coast Highway in California humming “Let’s go, let’s go to San Francisco...” and feeling rather like Thelma or Louise...

I tried my own internet experiments en route including:

- I set up my own blog.
- I asked on my own and other people’s podcasts for folks to meet and places to go to that were relevant to my study.
- I joined various online communities and set up my own Facebook group.

The full results of these experiments will be available in my Study Report [??ref???](#).

Since returning home I have been asked many times to talk about my Nuffield Study – “Web 2.0”. Sadly the reactions I get are:

“But Heather this is all very well – I use the internet for Google and eBay but I don’t need ‘social media’!”

I say, ‘Social Media’ and I look out at blank faces... ”Blogging, podcasting, Facebook” I plead...

At this point most farmers have completely switched off.

- *I haven’t got time...*
- *It’s for the kids...*
- *It’s not safe...*
- *It’s nothing to do with me...*
- *How do you make money from that then?*

Whilst it’s true that fewer than half the farmers in the UK have internet access – and in remote areas things are even worse in terms of take-up and access - this just serves to prove how behind we are compared to our urban counterparts.

In 2007, 15 million households in Great Britain (61%) had Internet access. This is an increase of 36% since 2002.

Of those with access, by 2007 some 84% had a broadband connection, up

from 69 per cent in 2006.

Internet World Stats reported that, as at 31st May, 2008, the estimated number of internet users in the world was 1,412 Million. That means *over 20% of the world population* using the web.

The online individual now has a global voice and whether you like it or whether you don't, they have the tools to spread news – good or bad - about your company, or your sector or you.

Your children, your customers, your suppliers, your advocates and your enemies are already there, they are online now. They can share information and recommendations at the press of a key. This is word of mouth marketing – but on a global scale.

We already know about the power of word-of-mouth marketing:

For example my Gran was born in 1888. She ran the bakery and drove a horse and cart around the villages to deliver bread. It was unusual for a woman to do this at that time and my Gran's bread was freshly baked early every morning in Preston on Wye using local ingredients. It tasted good. She grew the business by delivering regularly and folks would wait for her to arrive and tell their neighbours that Flo's bread was delicious, and that the van came at 10am.

Direct recommendation – classic word-of mouth marketing.

But then along came advertising. Over the years instead of going for the best bread, with the best taste, we listened to advertisements. For the next 100 years our decisions to purchase were dominated by the media and adverts. If you were my Gran you were unlikely to grow your business significantly unless you had a very big advertising budget like Hovis or Homepride. Brands were built by throwing money at media channels to get the brand inside the consumer's mind.

Looking at how individuals are using the internet now, some of that power is shifting. Consumers are exposing problems from suppliers and retailers and sharing those online. On a positive note they are sharing good news, reviewing products and sharing their experience.

A new transparency is here...

"I remember landing under sniper fire," Hilary Clinton said in a major foreign policy speech at George Washington University on March 17. Unfortunately for her someone had photographed it, and someone else had filmed it and were only too pleased to publish these online, and the truth was out. She did not land under sniper fire...

What if you do have something to hide?

I met a farmer during my Nuffield Study year whom I quizzed about his intensive chicken enterprise. I asked him if he could justify it. He replied that he couldn't really, but that his father had started it when margins had not been squeezed to the extent they were now.

I asked him if he was comfortable with how the chickens were kept and

dealt with, and he admitted he was not.

I asked him if he ate his own chicken and he explained that most certainly he did not, he sourced the chicken for his family from the free range farm 6 miles away.

A one to one conversation as per the above is perplexing and in some ways sad, and I have no doubt that the farmer would not give that particular interview to Radio 4. However these days everyone is a potential journalist. You only had to look at the news when the floods hit the Midlands to see that most clips came from the ‘citizen journalists’ on the ground. I saw the clip of Saddam Hussein being executed on YouTube and it was filmed by a bystander in the room.

I myself could so easily have featured that chicken farmer on my podcast, and by now it would have had 100,000 downloads. Other “journalists” could have rebroadcast and republished it throughout the world. We all know that one dissatisfied person will tell fourteen others and so I’ve no doubt this story could spread to literally millions of people within hours.

I travelled out to a remote island off the coast of Washington State to meet a farmer called Neal Foley, aka Podchef. Despite the isolation, Podchef is connected globally and getting his views and opinions to reach a global audience. He makes a videocast and a podcast from his farm and attacks issues head on. From grass fed beef through antibiotics, Podchef has a voice and influence. This would have been impossible just 3 years ago. RSS – Really Simple Syndication - means that he can choose which news he receives and subscribe to it under one web page. He is more up to date with detailed information on UK agriculture than most farmers I know who live here.

The bigger picture

The story is not basically the internet, it is the story of connection. It’s not the tools: they will come and go. *It is the fact that people of like mind can communicate around the world.* Whether it’s the Wiggly Groupies on Facebook, the Stitch and Pitch ladies in NYC, or farmers sharing best practice, the point is never before have we had the ability to create our own content and share it globally.

Now farmers and rural business can talk direct with the general public and present their message, untampered, to their potential customers and advocates wherever they may be. As I have found out in my own marriage (mind you, - I’m not saying he’s right!) with open discussion comes understanding, which can then lead to collaboration and improvements, and changes from both sides.

Grasp this revolution with both hands.

About the author

Heather Gorringe (heather@wigglywiggers.co.uk) is married to Phil Gorringe and they are based on Lower Blakemere Farm in Herefordshire. They farm 485 ha (1200 acres) of which 400ha is arable. The main crops are cereal and grass for seed plus vining peas. Also they have 150 single-suckler cows.

Heather founded Wiggly Wigglers – an eco-gardening company with a £2.5m turnover, selling bird seed, feeders, composters, plants, flowers, turf, tools and worms. Lower Blakemere Farm now supplies all of the bird food and most Wiggly products are sourced locally, mostly from other farmers. The company sells direct to around 100,000 individual customers all over the UK and over half of their sales are online. Wiggly Wigglers (www.wigglywigglers.co.uk) produced one of the world's first gardening and farming podcasts and now has thousands of weekly listeners from all over the world. The company won the Global Dell Business Award in 2008 the Dell Small Business Excellence Award, won The Food and Farming Industry Award for Business Development of the Year in 2007, and was the Farmers Weekly Alternative Enterprise award winner in 2006 (see www.wigglywigglers.co.uk/life/awards).

Heather is a Nuffield Scholar (2007) studying 'The Development of the Web and Social Media', and completed the Institute of Agricultural Management Leadership Course in 2008. You can read more about her study tour at <http://heathergorringe.typepad.com>.