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## Innovation news

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## Social TV - from idea to service

*Jeff Patmore, BT's head of strategic university research, tells the story of how social TV made the journey from research idea to potential portfolio item thanks to tenacity, creativity and the power of collaboration.*



In September 2008 the Communications Futures Programme (CFP) program at MIT published a paper on social TV (Innovation at the Edge: Social TV and Beyond).

The paper was written by Natalie Klym and Marie-José Montpetit of Motorola and scientist in residence at MIT.

Marie-Jose had been looking into TV OTT (over the top) services with Motorola and suggested in the paper that any radically new service would have to be able to interact with end users, i.e. the viewer.

She felt that taking a leaf out of the fast-rising world of social networking - allowing users to interact with one another - would be the exactly the right prescription to enable social TV services to begin to take-off and flourish.

As it happens we at BT had been thinking along similar lines. Our research into social networks, led by an anthropologist at Cambridge Kathleen Richardson, had provided us with a real insight into why people like these social networks and how they use them. This, coupled with our business need to enhance our future BT Vision service, had led us down a parallel path.

When we discussed this with Marie-Jose she felt that a collaboration would be both useful and beneficial.

However, we were unable to convince some of our business colleagues that this was a good idea, so we had to find a low cost way to progress some research, while the market caught up with these new ideas.

### Leadership programme

Around the same time I was at MIT and a colleague, Bill Lucas, explained that a new initiative had started, called the Gordon Engineering Leadership (GEL) Programme.

This took the best Engineering undergraduate students and put them through leadership training. Part of the scheme placed the students in industry for summer internships.

I explained that I would really like to be involved, as the idea of having access to the best of the best for an engineering internship seemed like a no-brainer.

We agreed a way of doing this and I interviewed a student recommended to me by the faculty driving the GEL initiative.

Tanya Goldhaber, was her name and she was just outstanding. The energy, enthusiasm, drive, knowledge, communication skill and engaging personality were all off the scale.

We agreed that she should spend the summer with us and her first project would all be about social TV.

I explained my dilemma with social TV to Tanya and our need to radically change how customers both interact with a TV service and navigate the content. How do we solve the problem of choice for customers who were faced with having to potentially find their way across thousands of channels.

She loved the project and the challenge.

Over the summer Tanya proved to be a force of nature, overcoming both technical problems and people's attitudes. She provided us with evidence which supported our arguments and convinced key people that this was a sensible way forward.

Tanya introduced us to the 'friend recommendation system.' This is a system that enables your friends to recommend TV programmes via an internet-connected remote control that also includes a messaging display). Through a series of small trials, the friend recommendation system showed it could really enhance the whole TV experience.

### Great passion

Tanya's passion for the project and its goals was, to use an American word, awesome.

Later in the summer Marie-Jose came to the UK and gave a talk on her research, which had taken, again, a parallel course to our own. She showed a NeXtream system she had developed with MIT Media Lab students and it was remarkably similar to Tanya's work in that it used a touch screen phone as a service interface.

I had a visit to MIT coming up, so agreed to follow up with Marie-Jose while there.

It was at this time (October 2009) that the MIT Technology Review, a quarterly technology magazine reporting on new technologies and ideas, mainly in the US, came to see us.

They had heard about the BT and MIT work and were keen to write a short article.

Marie-Jose and I were both interviewed and the article was **published**.

We continued to work with Marie-Jose and Tanya. The key output that quarter (Autumn 2009) was a story board on a possible future service, produced by Tanya and Sue Hessey of BT, the cast for visuals were MIT students and the location and props were provided by the Media Lab. This allowed us to take our ideas to BT Retail at very low cost.

Then in February 2010 were again contacted by the MIT Technology Review.

The magazine wanted to interview us about our social TV work again. This time they wanted a more in-depth look at our research, but did not really explain why. I was at MIT and spent some time with a freelance journalist hired by the MIT Technology Review who was ex-Washington Post and a very good writer.

### Making the top ten

It only became evident later that the magazine was selecting technologies for its annual 'Top 10' review. The objective is to



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give a view of technologies the magazine believes will change the world over the following 12 months.

So to our surprise we were selected as one of the Top 10, and for a UK company this is very rare indeed. It was certainly our collaboration with MIT which made the difference, and working with both a senior academic (as by this time Maria-Jose had moved to MIT), and a very bright student, Tanya, gave them a story which was quite unique.

Tanya had, by this time, decided she should study for her PhD at Cambridge, having been introduced to some interesting people by myself and had won a Marshall Scholarship (UK) in November 2009, to fund her research at Cambridge.

In April 2010 a formal strategic research project started, led by Andy Gower who leads the new BT research area on Future TV – and has an impressive track record in media research.

Soon after this Andy was interviewed by BBC Click and in May working with our local and Group PR people we organised a press event and via the CISCO Telepresence units brought together Andy, Marie-Jose and myself with our PR team and the press. This has led to a cascade of articles, just put social TV + BT into Google and you will see the various articles.

### Great timing

The priority of developing good IPTV services has of course moved right to the top and the PR and research could not have come at a better time. However the core idea of this not being just TV and home area networks and mobile networks but a network of networks and of devices collaborating to provide a common shared experience, is a powerful one.

A cynic could argue that much of this was a happy coincidence and of course some luck was involved. But monitoring the market, business climate, key business needs and matching these to opportunities to work with fantastic people is one of the things we do.

Now we need to carry out more user trials and forge on with the development of a recommendation system that combines an automated approach with recommendations from friends, something that we hope will provide our users with an experience they find intuitive to use and useful.

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