

we write about the things we build and the things we consume

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content aggregation: what are you waiting for?

Here at MetaBroadcast we've always taken a keen interest in the idea of aggregating video and audio content from several sources in one place. Why? Because it's what users expect.

The basis of TV and radio is that each channel presents itself to the audience in a single, consistent form. On simpler platforms that just means you can access each channel in the same way—with the same simple TV or radio. On more complex platforms, like digital cable and satellite, metadata is aggregated together, so that users can browse schedules and lists of programmes, or sometimes search for a show. Users don't have to do anything different to discover and watch content on a new channel. This simple experience has rarely been replicated online.

Many people feel there is a strong logic for a broadcaster to maintain a siloed site containing only their own content, and to refuse content syndication opportunities. It means not sharing your audience with other creators of content. And, increasingly importantly, no sharing of the all-important data either.

But the web is rather good at sharing information around, and users like it too—maybe because they're used to it on existing platforms. Increasingly, broadcasters and publishers are missing opportunities if they don't include other people's content on their site.

This is not a new idea online: [Amazon](#) saw dramatic growth when it started including inventory from independent retailers in its search results. Similarly, [Facebook's](#) growth is strongly correlated with the point at which it allowed third parties to create apps inside their pages. We've been constantly amazed by our analysis of search terms on various public prototypes. Users don't know, and presumably don't care, what channel a piece of content comes from. They're simply searching for the shows and the talent they identify with. Often they'll stick service brand names like 'youtube', or in the U.K. 'iplayer', or '4od' on the end of the search, in the hope that a playable video shows up. There's little correlation between the service offering the content and the service mentioned by the person searching for content.

This afternoon the [BBC](#) launched their [iPlayer Interlinking service](#) in the UK. At MetaBroadcast we're pleased to have been involved in feeding some of the data to this exciting project. Interlinking is a simple idea—from now on, when you search for content or browse listings on the iPlayer on-demand service, you'll get links to other TV broadcasters, too.

Interlinking is a smart move. This is the fourth time the BBC has been involved in an online TV aggregation project. The previous three have been cancelled, or

majorly delayed”: Projects [Kangaroo](#)) and [Marquee](#) both fell foul of the regulators (although the former has re-emerged with pleasing results as [SeeSaw](#)). Meanwhile, much has been written about the prospects of [YouView](#), which is delayed until 2012. All these past projects required a complex mix of competing stakeholders to agree on a huge range of issues. During my stint in the BBC’s strategy department, and as a strategist at [McKinsey](#), I sat around the negotiating table for several such initiatives. They’re really tricky to get off the ground, because all the obvious structures require a substantial central organisation. I’ve not been involved in the negotiations around Interlinking, but it seems to have been much simpler to launch, because there’s no central organisation.

Even smarter is the UK Radioplayer project, which has been [demoed here](#), and is expected to launch soon. This is another initiative that MetaBroadcast is [proud to be involved in](#). The Radioplayer is a much tighter integration than Interlinking, with a consistent player across all stations. But it’s still got almost no central organisation.

The grand-daddy of all aggregators is [Visa](#), the world’s largest card scheme. Visa has a colossal profile worldwide, and a few years back had the biggest IPO in US history. The power of Visa is not in the central organisation, but in the banks it aggregates. In 2004 there were 22,000 Visa member banks worldwide, all sending and receiving payments to each other freely. Yet the central Visa organisation employs just 3,000 people, who do little more than manage a core IT system and the famous brand. In contrast, American Express (a classic silo—it has few interchange arrangements with banks) employs 67,000 to handle many times fewer transactions than Visa.

It’s no surprise that aggregation attempts failed until broadcasters went for a model that has a small central organisation, just like Visa.

We encourage you to reconsider the role of aggregation. In fact, we’ve been doing this for a couple of years now in several confidential consulting projects, as well as publicly. We’ve seen it deliver up to [40% more views](#) to the aggregating party’s content.

If you need a good source of consistent video and audio metadata, maybe we can help.

[Atlas, our audio and video index](#) now has data from all the UK broadcasters, as well as many online services. Different sources have different rules on sharing the data, so do give us a shout if you’d like to know more. Whether you’re small or big, we’d love to work with you! Why not start by sharing your hopes and fears in the comments, and who knows, we might just end up chatting over tea and [cake](#).