CharityComms podcast – Episode 5 transcript

Robyn: Hi there and welcome to the second episode in our two-parter on the future of audience engagement. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Robyn, the Events Officer here at CharityComms.

Sushi: And I'm Sushi from the Digital Team at Scope. In the first part of this episode we spoke to Marnie Winter-Burke and James Barker from the NSPCC on how the Charity is putting its audiences front and centre in campaigns. They also gave us the lowdown on a new project to improve the website so it's more audience-centred.

Robyn: Indeed. For this episode we dialled in to chat to the tech savvy Matt Haworth, Co-Founder of Reason Digital based in Manchester. He gave us the lowdown on what he sees coming down the technology pipework and how charities can make the most of the opportunities it might present. Here it is…

Slack audio call tone

Matt: Hiya.

Robyn: Hi Matt. It's so great to have you choice us via phone. How's the weather in Manchester?

Matt: It is absolutely gloriously terrible! It has just started raining here for the first time in weeks and I'm absolutely loving it.

Robyn: Oh you've only just had rain?

Sushi: oh you're loving it, interesting take!

Matt: Like a lot of digital people, I'm not really built for hot weather. And doing a job where you're kind of stuck behind a laptop for most of the day definitely doesn't help, even though it has been great at the weekends.

Robyn: Dim, windowless rooms, that's what you're into, that's good to know!

Matt: Oh yes! And rain!

Robyn: Yeah! Plenty of rain. Well I mean Manchester is a good spot for that isn't it? So you're in the right place.

Matt: You've got to get on with the rain here if you want to live here.

Robyn: So we just wanted to start off with some questions about your background in the sector. So how long have you been doing this kind of work in the third sector?

Matt: Really I've been doing it, I think, all my working life. So the reason I set up with my colleague, Ed Cox, about 10½ years ago, as a social enterprise, digital innovation agency, to help predominately charities to harness the potential of technology to do social good. But before that I worked for the BBC and the University of Manchester, so I've always been about using digital in at least some kind of public purpose.

Robyn: Brilliant. It sounds like you knew you wanted to do this from quite a young age then?

Matt: Yeah. I'm not quite sure why that was. I think I was kind of searching for a career at the same time that I was listening to angry anti-capitalist punk rock music, and I think the two things just sort of merged together into this like slightly lame sort of execution of that desire to sort of completely overturn everything in the world. So now, yeah, I help charities do stuff on computers.

Robyn: Brilliant. So what changes would you say you've observed in terms of how charities engage with their audience since you came into the sector?

Matt: Almost everything. The conversations I was having 10½ years ago with charities were literally as basic as, "Is the internet a fad?" You know, "Do people really need a website anyway?" You know, "We are all about face-to-face, it's all about the importance of the human here." You know, "Digital's not for us." You know, it was those kind of conversations. And actually, in that time, I think all organisations have really embraced the role of digital perhaps in marketing their services, and around sort of communicating in like a relatively straight sort of line way. But I think where there is progress being made now is around, not just having a digital presence that talks about the amazing work that you do, but actually does the amazing work that you do as well. And that is where we are seeing a lot of really cool innovation and a lot of interesting uses of new technology to do good.

Robyn: Brilliant! One of our questions then was what has the impact of technology been on engagement in that time? But it sounds like it's had a huge impact. Not only on the day-to-day workings of charities but in terms of how charities view their connection with their audience and how best to engage with them. That's really incredible.

Matt: Absolutely. And one thing that has been interesting is that companies have had to adapt to digital by understanding that really thought leadership really wins online. You know, being able to take a standpoint, have a perspective, have knowledge about a particular area. That's what's going to attract people to your, you know, via social media field, to the website

and drive results. A lot of people say, when I meet them – colleagues in the digital industry outside of the charities – "Oh, you're Reason Digital. You guys do that weird niche thing with charities." And I kind of see it in reverse. I think that the majority of the digital industry focuses on just selling us stuff that we don't really need through the internet, and what we do here is basically we are concerned with literally every other aspect of the human experience, because that's what charities provide. And I think charities have kind of landed on their feet in a way because they have been for years, decades, all about kind of thought leadership about these deeply important things to people. You know, be that deeply important things in terms of times of difficulty or need, or things that surround really deeply held beliefs and personal values about how people, and animals and the environment should be treated. So I think that is, for charities that are connecting that voice and that purpose through digital effectively, I think that is really, really succeeding for them.

Sushi: So, you gave a fantastic talk at our Engagement conference earlier this year and you discussed some of the tech trends that were on the horizon, and you've already touched on this a bit but what do you think are driving these trends?

Matt: I think there are all sorts of things driving these trends. I think the first thing that is driving them is societal change. So we often think a little bit around, you know, technology about being, "Oh people have some smartphones now so we can reach people through smartphones". But it isn't just that. The technology that people are using is reshaping the way that they live and the way that they relate to organisations and the way that they relate to each other. For example, I was working with a small charity that supports male sex workers, and they used to find their service users by hanging around where male sex workers plied their trade. But now this is all happening online. It's all happening on the internet. That has not only changed the way that they need to reach those people, and they've been adapting to that in interesting ways, like hanging out on some of those websites and trying to promote their services to service users there, but it's also changed the way that their service users are living, and it's changed the profile of risk and vulnerability of those service users as well. So, you know, those sex workers are doing more what is called in and out calls, i.e. inviting people round to their homes or going into their homes, which in some ways makes them safer but in some ways makes them much more vulnerable as well. So they've had to change not just how they reach people and use digital to do that, they've also had to really rethink how can we help these people, and what are their vulnerabilities, in the context of this new reality where these sex workers are effectively individual digital entrepreneurs that are selling their services online. So I think that's one real sort of thing that is often missed, I guess, in these discussions.

Sushi: Really interesting. That means that people really understand their service users, or their audience, or their beneficiaries or their donors. They've gone and spoken to those people and they understand their needs, their wants, their desires. So it goes back to a lot of our conversations with our podcast guests about being close to your users' needs.

Matt: Yeah. And it's really interesting how – yeah, digital, I always see it as this kind of really extreme thing to do. And the things that we build here at Reason Digital, and charities are building, it's some of the most, if not *the* most, complex thing in their organisation. I mean the amount of technology that you are leveraging to get something even simple to happen. We are talking about writing layers of interface code, backend code, databases. These things all exist on servers. They communicate with each other through networks of cables in the ground and fibre optics undersea and satellites. Effectively, we are putting this thing on this teetering stack of technology that exists now. And actually, when you're doing that and you're working in those extremes, it really sort of focuses the mind around how do we get this right? How do we deal with that complexity? How do we make sure that people are going to use this thing? And the principles that have come out of that in terms of really intense user research and consultation, and code design, things around agile iterative development, and not just things that are useful in a digital context. Those skills and capabilities are really useful in all areas, but they've just been forged in this quite extreme set of circumstances that we work in in the digital industry day in/day out.

Sushi: That's so true isn't it?

Robyn: Yeah.

Sushi: Because really the principles of agile feel like you can apply – it's like a manifesto for life sometimes. Sometimes when I talk to some of my colleagues I feel I'm slipping into talking about things and using some of the concepts of agile. I think oh no, they're going to think I'm being annoying and geekie. But, anyway, no, I agree. I definitely agree.

Matt: I read a really depressing blog post a few months ago where somebody was saying, "How I apply agile principles to my relationship."

[Laughter]

Robyn: Wow!

Matt: About this relationship with his partner where they have like an agile backlog and they had retrospectives about their relationship.

Sushi: Oh my God!

Robyn: But maybe they've cracked it. Maybe that is the key to a healthy relationship and we're all doing it wrong.

[Laughter]

Robyn: That is amazing.

Matt: I have enough Post-its in my life, I think!

Sushi: And what about things like the affordability of technology and how it's maybe – is it? Is it easier or cheaper to develop things now?

Matt: Yeah, it is. But it's one of those things where it doesn't really feel like it, and it's an interesting paradox. That is just because, you know, there's probably one of those clever names for this, like Godwin's Law or something like that, but the rate at which technology is accelerating and becoming more and more complex is always moving on. And therefore, if you're working at the kind of cusp of that, you're always going to be finding it quite expensive to develop things. But what that leaves behind is kind of the basics being really sorted. I mean ten years ago content management systems were not all that, and now we just kind of take for granted that we can get something like WordPress or Drupal for free, and just have all of that stuff ticked off.

Sushi: Yeah.

Matt: And it's the same sort of thing that we're seeing with kind of AI. That used to be a very expensive thing to apply but actually, increasingly, this kind of AI as a service in the cloud makes certain kinds of tasks quite straightforward and quite cheap to compute. So, yeah, tech feels like it's getting more expensive but actually it's getting cheaper; we're just taking the cheap stuff for granted I think.

Robyn: Hmmm, interesting. Do you think that applies to charities that feel like that's out of their reach then? That it's not necessarily out of their reach, it's just that it's the cheaper stuff that seems less exciting and innovative?

Matt: I think there is a little bit of that. I mean it's bloody amazing what you can do with a great website in terms of terms of the difference that you can make to people. There are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people, in the UK tonight that are probably going to Google for something that is incredibly challenging to them, difficult, worrisome, and they are going to find a bunch of charity websites, touchwood, that is going to have a certain amount of quality of information on there. And that could be as simple as, "You need to talk to Susan on our helpline that works every second Wednesday of every month with a full moon" on one extreme. Or it could be, "Here's an amazing part of our website that pre-empts all your questions

and gives you exactly what you need to know about." You know, the information and knowledge that you get from that is just as good as if you'd spoken to somebody or you'd had a face-to-face kind of session with somebody. You can do that on a website that – I don't know, you could get one for £10 a month from Squarespace, so you can have an immense impact on people's lives with very little money if you've got the content right and you've got the experience right. But, absolutely, if you're aspiring to do stuff with AI and machine learning and fun stuff like that, it's going to take a little bit of budget to get some code written. But there are strategies that smaller organisations can use to adapt to that.

Robyn: One of your points you made in your plenary was about avoiding making the technology simply an add-on, but instead it's about adding to the overall experience that someone would have when they're engaging with your charity. Do you have any advice or some things that you think charities should consider to avoid that pitfall?

Matt: I think really charities shouldn't underestimate what their expertise is, in terms of their cause area but also really representing the needs and rights and concerns of a group of people that, given the nature of charity, is often a minority or often is marginalised. So actually I think it's about really starting there. There has been some really cool, some really productive, innovation in the charity sector that starts with, "Oh hey, there's a cool piece of technology over here, what might we do with it?" So I don't really want to discount that and that's always going to happen. But I think there is also power to actually really knowing, and thinking and being expressive about the problems that people are facing, or the needs that they have, your service user, as all your supporters, and actually thinking about designing solutions that really speak to that. I think digital is often seen as separate as well, simply because there is a head of digital or there is no head of digital. So it's considered something that needs funding separately, doing separately, a separate thing. So much of the best work that is going on in the charity digital space at the moment, I think, is where somebody has been doing something amazing in quite an analogue, unscalable sort of way and they've digitised it, and it's meant that something can grow, you know, 100 times bigger at the same cost or cheaper. So, yeah, we don't always have to kind of tear up the page. I also really think we need to be thinking about how we fund digital because there is too many organisations, in my view, that will only think about doing something digital if they can get some digital funding, and it has to be kind of digital funding otherwise they would have spent it on something else. The potential and the impact, both in terms of scalability but also in terms of cost saving on some of this stuff is incredible. I think sometimes it's just put in a little corner to itself with a digital badge on it and, actually, if I was to propose any other way to those organisations that they could cut their costs in half of delivering that service, or they could reach 100 times more people with the same amount of staff, they would bite your hand off to fund that with their reserves. But, actually, just because it

happens to be digital, "Well, can we get a digital fund to look at that?" I think that's getting better but it's still certainly something I see.

Robyn: Yeah, definitely. I think that's very common across the sector, that digital is still quite siloed. In a way then, as that technology is advancing and the ways that people are interacting with it changes and adapts, the range of people who then can access it also changes, and accessibility is an issue that needs to be keeping up. Charities need to be incorporating that into the things they're building. "Who can access it? Who isn't able to access it? Is it possible for a screen reader to read this?" Or something like that. Have you seen any examples of charities doing this well? Or is there anything you would like to see more of on this front?

Matt: There is stuff I would like to see less of. We can maybe start there.

[Laughter]

Robyn: Excellent.

Matt: Sticking a button on your website that lets somebody change the text size. That is a pet peeve of mine. I hope nobody in the room next to this one is doing that on a website.

Sushi: No, no!

Matt: But the idea, frankly, that somebody with specific accessibility means will just be kind of like bouncing around the internet unable to read anything and then doing that for several hours, days, years, and then suddenly come across your website that has an increased text size button and finally be able to use the website doesn't really stand up to second scrutiny does it? So I think really it's about designing with accessibility in mind right from the off. And it's also about designing with it in mind that people who have specific accessibility needs will have adapted the tools that they're using, or have learnt to use the adaptations built into tools to help them. It's our job to really make sure that what we're building plays really nicely with those adaptations. I've had some amazing conversations with people about the power of the new accessibility features that are built into some products that Apple are putting out, you know the iPad and iPhone. I had one conversation with a guy that was using an app on his phone that wasn't actually designed to be an accessibility app at all. All it did was you could show your phone's camera to something and it would tell you what the colour of the object you were point it at was. It was supposed to be a tool for designers basically. But because, built into the iPhone is a screen reader, what he was able to do was to turn that screen reader on. So when he pointed his phone at an object it would read aloud the colour. So this guy who had a visual impairment now had this kind of tool that could help him start to understand the colours of the world for the first time.

Robyn: Oh that's great.

Matt: And he was talking about how at one time he was just holding his phone up to various things and it just kept saying, "Black, Black" over and over again, and that's when he realised the lights were off. It's not really something he'd had to think about before. So that just kind of happened because that app was built with accessibility in mind. So, yeah, I think getting beyond specific apps and tools and experiences for people with accessibility needs and just making sure that everything you build is in some way accessible is important.

Robyn: Yeah, and the more it's included the more it will create opportunities and different aspects of looking at things, just like that story proves. I think the more we think about it, the more lightbulb moments we'll have with how we can, you know, use an element of it that we haven't initially anticipated will be great for accessibility but, actually, if you use it this way, and then you include that, and you switch on this capability on your phone that already exists, yeah, that's fantastic.

Matt: Yeah. I think accessibility benefits all of us. We are all at various states of accessibility need I think at different points in our life. If you're particularly bleary-eyed waking up at the first moment on a Sunday morning you might not be able to read smaller text so well. If you can easily increase the size of that text then that can work for you as well. So really not kind of segmenting this stuff. I think there are threats and opportunities provided with accessibility by new technologies as well. So I know that Microsoft, for example, I saw some great work that they were doing recently. You might not know but built into PowerPoint is a button that you can push that will just put captions across your PowerPoint slide, so as you're talking your laptop microphone will listen to you and it will, using machine learning, it will turn what you're saying into text and it will put subtitles like your TV programme on the screen, which is surprisingly good actually. Using the Microsoft Translator app you can actually tune into that if you're sat in a room and get those close captions translated into another language as well and see that live while someone is talking. So technology is making it even easier for accessibility to happen. But we've noticed some interesting challenges with accessibility, with being at the forefront of using this stuff for social good, because, in a way, you're kind of using things in ways that they were never maybe intended to be used, or it wasn't a primary use. So if you think about voice assistance, for example, things like Alexa, the kind of primary business driver for that is obviously capturing more touchpoints with that user, so we're thinking of probably maybe 20 to 40 year old user, maybe they've got a family and the dream, of course, from these companies is that somebody is going to say, "Hey, let's buy something" and the assistant will help that be bought. But we've been working with Age UK to use Amazon products to understand voice commands from older people and actually, whilst that works, older people

talk in a certain way, the voice changes as we age, you also find that older people will have, of course, a thick accent or use certain slang that might not be in common usage anymore or might be highly regional, and these voice assistant algorithms have not necessarily been trained to deal with this yet.

Sushi: Oh, interesting.

Robyn: Yeah.

Matt: So actually what you've got is a device that has extraordinary potential for an age group that might not have the knowledge or dexterity to use a tiny smartphone screen, but could have a conversation with a home assistant, but actually maybe the algorithm is not quite there yet in understanding how they talk quite as well as they would be, perhaps, me or a 20-something American guy from California who helped programme the thing.

Robyn: Right.

Matt: So we need to not rest on our laurels with this stuff I guess, even though we're seeing amazing innovation powered by these things. I think charities have a role to play in kind of speaking up for their user groups.

Sushi: Yes, I'm sure.

Matt: Around making sure these new devices that have so much potential actually do meet that potential because they consider the needs of the users that we're supporting.

Sushi: For sure, definitely.

Robyn: Also getting to grips with the newer stuff but clearly just fully understanding the capabilities of what we already have, because I didn't know that about PowerPoint.

Sushi: I didn't either!

Robyn: There is so much that is already inbuilt to the programmes and technology that we already have sitting on our desk every single day, that we're using in a very specific way, that we've used for, you know, for most of us, God, what at least ten years now, that we just don't think to look for these new capabilities. Or every time it does an update, "It looks exactly the same!" but maybe it's not, maybe it now has a capability to put captions for what you're saying or something like that.

Matt: Yeah, and it's not just the actual companies themselves, like Microsoft and Amazon and people like that, that are baking more accessibility into

their products, but there is some amazing, interesting stuff being done by various, what I would term hackers, as in people that are kind of building their own technology and changing existing devices to do new cool stuff.

Robyn: Yeah.

Matt: I saw recently a guy that has used an Amazon Echo show, which is like Alexa but with a screen and a camera built into it, and used a machine learning toolkit that Google released called Tensorflow. He has combined these two things together to basically get Alexa to understand sign language, so that somebody who isn't able to speak will be able to trigger things on an Alexa which is something that Amazon didn't build into that device. But somebody, a very skilled person with a good idea and a lot of time on his hands, has managed to make that happen. We are even seeing that further on, just from accessibility, there is some amazing and, frankly, quite terrifying experiments that a group of tech-savvy people with diabetes are doing, where they are using kind of off-the-shelf digital tools to basically engineer themselves an artificial pancreas. So many people with diabetes have available to them now a kind of a sensor that they stick on to, and slightly into, their skin, that constantly monitors their blood sugar, and some of them have insulin pumps as well, and people have been kind of hacking these two thing so that they can link to each other, so that when they need further insulin that it's automatically dispensed.

Sushi: Wow.

Matt: Now that is a truly transformational use of technology. It's also bloody terrifying, of course, because if your little hacked device just suddenly pumps you full of, you know, eight times as much insulin as the human body can handle, then that's a pretty devastating mistake. But there are people at the fringes of this stuff using things that none of these companies ever imagined would have this use, and doing amazing stuff that is helping people live better lives.

Sushi: So do you think charities are capitalising on, for example, the hackers, you called them the hackers, that are out there, is there an opportunity for charities to get – because it feels like if those people are exploring these options and this is something that they are doing in potentially their free time, or maybe their companies are supplementing them to do that, is this a way for charities to get access to that technology? Because, you know, it's costly to bring in developers to do things like that.

Matt: Absolutely, I think it is. And I think that we need to find ways to support those people. I almost think we need to see these people and treat them like corporate supporters or like donors but, instead of donating their money or donating their time like a volunteer would, they're donating their incredibly rare technical expertise towards the cause. And if that is kind of ingested by

that charity, that charity wraps their arms around it, then that is something that could have huge potential. I think these people that are hacking these devices and building new cool stuff at the fringes are often really overjoyed when a charity gets in touch with them and thinks what they're doing is kind of cool enough. I think there are barriers for that. I mean I'm sure that some people working for a diabetes charity will be pretty abjectly horrified to hear what I just said about people hacking these artificial pancreases.

Sushi: It's the concept isn't it? It isn't the actual thing they're doing, it's the idea that that possibility is out there.

Matt: Yeah.

Sushi: And opening yourself up to that option basically.

Robyn: I do find I'm ceaselessly surprised by the amount of people doing unbelievable things on the internet, or with technology, just because! There is so much going on out in the world and over the internet where people just send you links to this crazy thing that someone has spent half day doing, and maybe it was just a collection of memes that's especially funny in a certain order, and they will spend hours on that. And there is also people doing that but more worthwhile things as well. But it's mad what people are doing just for the hell of it.

Matt: Well memes are important too!

[Laughter]

Robyn: I'm glad you agree!

Matt: I think, yeah, you can almost see it, you know, back in the day, big companies used to spend a fortune on R&D because they were afraid that, unless they did that, someone else would come up with the great big invention that was going to put them out of business. But actually increasingly now that R&D spend is actually going towards acquiring start-ups. What they're doing is almost leaving the market to do the innovation. So hundreds of people try and fail various different things. One catches on and then they buy it before it can become a threat and they integrate it. We see that with tobacco and vaping, for example. That exact thing happened. I wonder if there is a way to kind of adapt that principle for slightly less sinister means in the charity sector, where we see all of these people that are tinkering and hacking and doing new cool stuff with technology, and see that as basically innovation and experimentation that we don't have to pay for as charities. But when the right things start to pop up that we can reach out, put our arm around it and really bring what our charity can provide in terms of scaling out a service, or the safeguarding, or the policy dimension. So I don't know if you've been following what's going

on with PrEP, The preventative HIV medication that the NHS are prevaricating about approving for use in the UK, or providing rather. But there was a bunch of people that basically felt very strongly, quite understandably, that this was a medication that should be available to people in the UK, particularly those in groups that are at risk, and they just took matters into their own hands. They ordered it from pharmaceutical companies abroad, they took those pills and then they went to their doctors and got tested to see if those pills were harmful, to see if those pills actually were effective. And then they put together websites that explained all this, showed you where you could buy the stuff, showed which ones they'd tested and which they hadn't. There are two websites, iwantprepnow and prepster. That is the style of kind of service provision and innovation that no professional charity in their right mind would advocate, right?

Robyn: Yeah!

Sushi: Yeah!

Matt: Just like human beings testing imported drugs on themselves. But actually those things have got to a point – we saw on the news a massive drop in new HIV infections. I think it was something like a 40% drop. That was put down to the work of these people doing that. It shows the impact that these, these tinkerers, these technologists, these people that are taking matters into their own hands and using digital to do it, can have. Now iwantprepnow has been taken under the wing of the Terrence Higgins Trust, who have made that an official part of their offering and work with the creators of that. So, again, that is kind of interesting. You know, I stress I'm sure this wasn't their kind of deliberate strategy, just to kind of turn a blind eye to people doing risky stuff and then pick it up afterwards, but effectively that's kind of what happened. It does really remind me of what companies do in letting high risk innovation happen in the market, and then picking those companies up and surrounding them with what they can provide in terms of that kind of route to market and corporate support. We've got a similar thing here but what the charities can provide of course is that level of professionalism, the understanding of user needs, the access to that audience, the safeguarding policies and approaches, and the funding sometimes. So I think that's been an interesting development. We really need to make sure that, as charities, we are open to this stuff I think.

Robyn: Yeah, definitely.

Sushi: For sure. It's just interesting isn't it? It's almost a bit organic, although it follows a model that is well-established in different industries. It's quite interesting. So one thing you talked about in your talk was the inevitable backlash and I was wondering if you could tell us why you think this is unavoidable?

Matt: Well obviously we see day-after-day in the media at the moment sort of news stories about either deliberate or inadvertent harm that's been done by technology and the fast and destructive progress of digital. Most recently in terms of social media. I think we are seeing that with social media in terms of its impact on mental health and also potentially in this kind of election meddling stuff around the election of Donald Trump and Brexit. So that is raising a lot of questions and I think a lot of people will inevitably come down on the side of actually I don't really want to use this stuff anymore, I don't think it's good for society, I don't think it's good for me. There is a surprising number – I don't have the stat to hand – of Gen Z'ers that have undertaken a voluntary digital detox. So this isn't just something that an older generation is kind of getting crotchety about and deciding that they're going to withdraw. This is actually something that the next generation are becoming increasingly aware of as well. And that's why I think it's quite inevitable, the signs are there, that we will see this kind of what I am calling kind of neo luddite thing where, just like we saw with the luddites destroying equipment in the industrial revolution in the mills, that we might see people kind of withdrawing and disrupting technical innovation and technical progress because of some of these perceived ill-effects of it, which, you know, for the record, I think are absolutely real issues.

Sushi: Yeah.

Matt: So it depends how you want to engage with this. I suppose the practical effects of this are that there might be less of a certain type of person on certain digital platforms. So we might struggle to reach them. At a time when the sector is getting really excited about personalisation and artificial intelligence, we might find it harder and harder to get consent from our users to capture the kind of data that we need to drive some of those technologies. So these are things that we are going to have to consider. Of course, this would be – we could probably take people on that journey if they have a lot of trust in us. But, as we know, there has been this kind of erosion of trust, particularly in the UK, in charities and in the concept of charity itself sadly. So you've kind of got this perfect storm of factors that might make it harder for charities to use technologies that rely on the kind of capture of information off people.

Sushi: So, we're just thinking about the ways that charities can practically keep up with technological trends, or make sure that they're horizon scanning, or make sure they're open to new innovations, what is it that they need to be doing? We're thinking about all size of charities but we're really thinking about smaller charities who don't necessarily have the resource to fund a digital technology officer who has X percent of their job to be horizon scanning, to be outreaching, to be finding people that are in the hacker space developing products that are relevant to their cause. What should smaller charities be doing?

Matt: I think it's a really good question. I think really there is no substitute for being interested in this stuff. It's a bit of a cop-out but I genuinely feel like unless you're actually interested in this stuff you just won't put the effort in to keep on top of it, because there is just so much change. I think letting go of trying to 'be on top of it' is also quite critical.

Sushi: Hmm, interesting.

Matt: I work in this space full-time, not even I'm on top of everything that is going on. There is too much going on. So making peace with the fact that you can kind of put your cup in the stream and get some of it but not necessarily are going to see everything and that's fine. It's also interesting to think about how far along the horizon you want to be looking. Because actually the latest developments in nanotechnology and quantum computation are super interesting. Worth reading about those. Probably going to be a few years before –

Sushi: I'm not on top of it but nanotechnology? What? I didn't even hear what you said!

[Laughter]

Matt: So, I think those are a few sort of caveats and considerations but, beyond that, I would say that the sector voices organisations like CharityComms and people like NCVO, CAST, people like that, that are putting out really good stuff – the Charities Aid Foundation as well has a great blog about technology that is really good. So, yeah, there is a lot of good sources about digital on these digital platforms. I find Twitter quite useful and, unless you accept that you're only going to see a certain amount of what goes on, Twitter is a very stressful place to be as well. But just find people that are working in this space doing interesting stuff.

Robyn: Yeah.

Matt: I think talking to each other as well is really important, you know, because you're not going to catch everything and everybody has got their focus and their ideas. If you're a medical research charity, there is other medical research charities thinking about the implications of this stuff. Funding innovations, learning from what works and, crucially, what doesn't work. And actually just speaking to your counterpart, Chief Exec, Head of Comms, Head of Digital or whatever, in those organisations and maybe organisations that are a little bit bigger than you. I think there is no substitute for that really.

Sushi: So if you're a Head of Digital come to the Heads of Digital Group. You're very welcome.

Robyn: Yeah, I was thinking that exactly, it's just that sharing of information. Even in your own organisation, between organisations even more enriching and incredible, which is obviously a big part of what we try and do within CharityComms, within our network, but, yeah, even within our team. Because I've been with CharityComms two years now but this is kind of the first job I've really had in the sector and I've learnt so much, mostly because our team, and the entire network, is so generous with what you share. But it's also utilising that resource and realising it's there. So obviously like Sush has a vast knowledge of the sector and it's amazing, and I've tapped into that and it's been incredible –

Sushi: Ahh, thanks Robyn!

Robyn: You're welcome! And we've got chat groups where different staff will share different things they've spotted on Twitter, maybe just on the BBC News website, just everywhere, and it does cut your own work in half because everyone is just contributing to the stream of knowledge, and it just opens up so many different thoughts and ideas, and it's completely worth doing. I was just thinking I totally agree with what you've just said.

Matt: Yeah, I think we need to be wary of FOMO as well, fear of missing out, that this creates. If you're even engaging a little bit with some of the information that's online, or doing a little bit on Twitter or whatever, you're doing more than you were before and more than was possible before. But the paradox, and in fact one of the reasons that social media can be harmful to your mental health, is that, by exposure to everything going on, it can be overwhelming and make you feel like you're falling behind. I think being cognisant of that fact and reminding yourself that, hey, even if I'm only dipping in on some of this stuff, once in a while that is better than nothing, and not falling into that trap of just feeling completely far behind compared to everybody else that you see that seem to do nothing but tweet all day.

Robyn: Digital self-care I think is what you're preaching there, which is brilliant. Okay, well the next question is quite a big one but why do you think tech is critical to the future of engagement? We sort of touched on it but do you think you've got any key summaries of that?

Matt: I mean, bluntly, if you don't have people to engage with, you don't have engagement. And digital is a space where quite a lot of people spend quite a big chunk of their lives these days.

[Laughter]

Robyn: Oh, that's brilliant.

Matt: That kind of foundational thing. But digital is opening up more and more opportunities for engagement and, you know, maybe just taking a

flipside of that question is why, as a human and a citizen, do I think it's important is that charities need a voice on these platforms and, without them, we are left with a bit of an echo chamber in terms of digital being used as a mechanism to kind of manipulate our votes to sell us things that might not be good for us. I think we really need the voice of the third sector. We need that third voice on there to actually cater for the rest of the human experience and to provide stuff for people that perhaps don't find themselves with a problem that can be addressed by the market, which is some of the most important problems in our lives. I would say that it's not just key that people engage, I think charities actually have a moral obligation to engage with digital, because without it they're simply going to stop being able to reach significant numbers of people that need their help, and they're going to leave an environment that lacks their voice, and they wouldn't dream of doing that in politics, you know, so why dream of doing it in digital?

Robyn: I think that's really true because ultimately what you've got on the internet is just an infinite number of different communities of people and, to be in a space where that community has maybe a voice that can contribute some level of safeguarding, or to even just create a space for a community you know is looking for a space to exist. So, for example, in our last episode we had Claudia Knowles from Breast Cancer Care and, although we were talking about their app, they also have various online communities where people can go and find someone that has been through something similar, had a similar experience. And creating those spaces and also being a healthy voice in those spaces that already exist is a really powerful thing that charities can do.

Matt: Totally. So we're doing some digital transformation work for the youth cancer charity CLIC Sargent at the moment. So I was talking to some young people with cancer a few weeks ago and they were talking to me about how they expected that social media would be an amazing thing, that would be nothing but help to them during their diagnosis and recovery from cancer, but actually they found that it had quite a lot of downsides. So one of them started a video diary that he subsequently stopped doing because he found that those downsides were significant enough to mean that he wanted to stop. So they were saying that, you know, initially that they were overwhelmed with the amount of support that they were getting on social media, to the point where they felt that they had an obligation to manage other people's emotions who were kind of reacting to that news en masse on social media. And then, later on, they found, when the news of their cancer diagnosis was kind of old news, that they just had this portal into the lives of their friends who had all gone off to university, and were getting a girlfriend, and were going to festivals, and progressing in their studies and all of that stuff, and they were seeing that at a time where they felt that they weren't able to do that, and that that made them feel abjectly worse. So actually, you know, that's kind of what's going on if a charity doesn't step in. But, you know, talking about breast cancer care in their communities and the

communities of other charities, just think of the power of actually being able to put that person within a community of people that are suffering from that same thing, or are facing those same challenges. Suddenly social media stops making them feel more alone and starts making them feel less alone. That is the difference that charities can make by engaging with digital. To a young person, you know, these guys I was talking to, there is no distinction between social media and life, in the same way that we don't distinguish between talking to people and not talking to people. It's just the way that they do it. So that is so important to them. The difference that that can make to them is absolutely extraordinary.

Sushi: Brilliant.

Robyn: Yeah, completely.

Sushi: So what innovations have you recently spotted that you're really excited about? And what things would you like to see more of?

Matt: In terms of innovations, it's probably nothing new but it's more the increasing accessibility of cool new stuff to people. So, people like Microsoft and Amazon are making a lot of machine learning and artificial intelligence tasks available through Amazon web services and Microsoft Azure. So what that means is it used to be very expensive to do something like, I don't know, take a video feed of somebody's face and get a computer to tell you whether they looked happy or sad or angry. Now that's something we could hook up in a matter of minutes because the service for understanding human emotion from a video feed is something that is being made available as a building block by those services. So that is cool because that gives us like more blocks of Lego that we can kind of play with and put together into new and exciting usage. I just saw, a few days ago, somebody had put together an augmented reality headset experience, so a set of glasses that you could wear effectively, that was designed for younger people with autism that were struggling to read the emotions of other people from their facial expressions, that use that exact technology to help train them to be able to be able to think through spotting what somebody's facial expressions said about their emotional state, which is something that might not come intuitively certainly with autism. So you can see already how the easier availability of some of that stuff is being able to be used by organisations to make a transformational difference to people. So that's really what I'm excited about, is the kind of lowering bar of entry to some of this stuff, like AI in particular.

Robyn: So, do you think that that is really going to be a big factor in terms of how this is going to change the shape of the charity sector? Because I think part of the conversation is saying we need to keep up and we need to continue paying attention as much as possible, but also there is an inevitability that the third sector will be shaped and developed by how

technology changes. Do you have any predictions of what you think it's going to look like over the next five/ten years or something like that?

Matt: I'm not sure about the state of the sector overall but definitely there are certain interesting things that I think will happen. I mean the digital brands of organisations are going to become a big part of their value, you know, how well-known they are, how big their databases are, their social media followings, their number of YouTube subscribers, is going to be an absolute key factor in the impact that they can create. If you are a charity working in a particular cause it probably won't take you long to find individuals and hobby projects and companies that have larger followings than you, even around the cause areas that you're supposedly the premier organisation of in the UK. So that would give me pause for thought personally if I was the CEO of one of those organisations or the head of comms at one of those organisations.

And lastly I would say that with artificial intelligence in particular, I really see that a key part of the value within charitable organisations in that five to ten year lifespan is likely to be an artificial intelligence, which has been trained both with the expertise of their very best case workers and advice workers, and exposure to what has and hasn't helped their service users in terms of recommendations, so that you almost have this kind of super genius level advice worker in your organisation that just happens to be an AI rather than a person, that you can feed in some factors about an individual or a problem and it will give you, pretty instantly, a recommendation about what you could offer that person or what that person should do, that isn't just based on knowledge and expertise of one person, but is a composite of the knowledge and expertise of many, many people and much observed experience. I think that's something that we need to think about as a sector right now, because a lot of us are rushing into relationships with companies with proprietary AI technology, and actually they are the ones that are keeping the insights and lessons for themselves and selling that back to us. You know, we might actually be missing out on what could be an absolute key part of our value later down the line if we could kind of own and control that AI model ourselves.

Sushi: Wow!

Robyn: That was so great. That was really interesting. Completely blew my mind! I think you just stunned us both into silence there.

Sushi: I can't get over the fact that you think you're not on top of the trends, Matt. Honestly, what are we? We're just, you know, absolutely ignorant really.

[Laughter]

Matt: The way I see it is there is always thousands and thousands of avenues of research and new bits of technology on the horizon, or past the horizon, and as those things start to come to the horizon and towards you, you know, more and more of them fall away because they don't work or you can't really find a way to use them, or they're not practical. So really the question is do you need to be on top of what's beyond the horizon? You know, how far ahead do you want to scan?

Sushi: Yeah, of course.

Matt: You know, rather than feeling like you need to know everything about what's in labs on the other side of the world that are not going to change anything for the next ten years, if they even ever do.

Robyn: Great.

Sushi: So just a final question.

Matt: Yeah?

Sushi: So, if a charity was like, *Sushi claps her hands* "Okay, right, let's go! We're going to get involved, we're going to get on this, we're going to do it." I'm going to say they're small because I just think, you know, we love our small charities. What should they do tomorrow? What's the thing they should do tomorrow? What's the thing that would make the biggest difference to making sure that they are – I'm not saying like doing the innovation, I'm not saying creating stuff, but what is it that they need to do to open up their –

Robyn: Priming themselves.

Sushi: Yeah, priming themselves to be open to this stuff?

Matt: I think there is a couple of things. So one is maybe look at the make-up of their board of trustees. If they can invite somebody to that board that has digital skills that is going to really be a great starting point. I think, beyond that, setting up a digital advisory board, so a mix of people with influence within the organisation mixed up with people that have digital expertise perhaps outside the organisation. You could maybe draw from your corporate supporters, so the head of digital from the corporate supporter would give a couple of hours of their time once a quarter or once a month. The other thing I would suggest is really getting in touch with their users and really deeply trying to understand their needs and also their digital behaviours. So that could be as simple as pulling together a focus group or doing some telephone interviews or a survey. It doesn't really matter how you want to do it. The best results you'll get probably is kind of telephone interviews plus a survey, or face-to-face interviews plus a survey if you've got the time and resource, but anything is better than nothing, right?

Sushi: Yeah.

Matt: And what you want to be asking them is what technology are they using? How are they using it? What websites are they using? Who do they subscribe to on YouTube? How are they using social media? Which platforms? So you can get a really good idea of where the people you are trying to reach are and how they're using this stuff, and the way in which it's changing their life. And, with that information, you can then use that as a starting point for innovation, rather than innovating based on a whole heap of assumptions.

Sushi: Fantastic. Roadmap. That's a roadmap for charities out there thinking how they do this stuff tomorrow.

Robyn: Yes. So comprehensive. Brilliant.

Sushi: Fantastic.

Matt: Well, there you go.

[Laughter]

Robyn: Well, on that note, thanks so much, Matt. That has been incredibly enlightening. It's been great to talk to you.

Matt: No worries. Great to talk to you. Thanks for having me on.

Robyn: So, how long do we think it's going to be before the robots officially take over?

Sushi: It's scary!

Robyn: I know. It's evolving faster than I can keep up with. If there's anything I can take away from Matt's talk that's what I took away for sure.

Sushi: Mmhmm. But also Matt has so much knowledge locked in his brain. I mean it was so much information. And, also, I think it was so great how he thought about charities with smaller budgets or just the practical tips that you could implement tomorrow. That is so exciting. I'm thinking to myself, "Oh, we could do that at CharityComms."

Robyn: Yes! Definitely. I think it's very easy to hear about things like AI and just think well that's completely out of my reach. VR, out of my reach. All these things are out of my reach. But the breadth and depth of different kinds of technology, and accessibility of technology, is constantly changing. New things are becoming more reasonable to small charities, smaller budgets, and it can be tricky to keep your finger on the pulse and know that those things are suddenly more realistically out there. I think part of that really is just talking to people. Talking to people who maybe have read a blog post or an interesting thing somewhere, are in a different forum, do have that kind of connection, and would be able to give you these kind of tips that will make these things more realistic for your charity and your organisation. Because it can be a bit overwhelming I would say as someone who definitely finds technology overwhelming.

Sushi: Yeah. But that PowerPoint thing though – Oh my God!

Robyn: I know! Our minds were blown.

[Laughter]

Robyn: That was great. Oh brilliant. Well that's it for part two of The Future of Audience Engagement Episode. We hope Matt's vast insight gave you a few ideas to take away and opened up some new possibilities. If you haven't checked out the first part of this episode, make sure you take a listen to all the great things NSPCC is doing to connect with its audience. If you want to drop me a line about something you would like to hear about in a future episode, or if you've got any questions for us, feel free to get in touch. You can find my details on the About Us section of the CharityComms website. Or alternatively, Sushi and I also spend way too much time on Twitter so you can catch us on there. My handle is @robynlewes.

Sushi: And I'm @sushi_juggapah. Make sure you subscribe if you'd like to be notified when we upload. And, if you enjoyed the episode, we would really appreciate if you could leave a review or a rating. We'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

Robyn: Bye.