

Webmaster

Fresh from the launch of BBC Knowledge, BBC Online's new commissioner is preparing a millennial revamp for its site, as Rob Buckley discovers

I realised what I really wanted was greasepaint, glamour and girls." Few can blame Jonathan Drori for his move from the academic world of 'electronics with artificial intelligence' to the slightly more exciting world of television. But it was the legacy of his degree that helped him move from his former incarnation of recording engineer to producing series like *Tomorrow's World*, *The Net* and *The Mind Machine* (no stereotyping of science graduates here) and into BBC Broadcast Online, where he starts as head of commissioning this month.

Drori is switching from BBC Education, where he was head of digital media and learning channels; this includes the new BBC Knowledge channel (and associated online content) which Drori played a large part in developing. He also founded the digital media unit, progenitor of the digital media and learning channels division and one of the first BBC groups to develop a website. "It was all very exciting and held together with string and knicker-elastic. But, for education, we could see that interactivity really had a future."

The team that Drori put together was initially interested in replacing things done conventionally, like sending out fact-sheets and involving audiences. But, when BBC management cottoned on to the expansion of the web, Drori's work expanded to include support for education campaigns like Fighting Fat, Fighting Fit and for series like *Teletubbies*.

He now has the task of devising BBC Production's web presence into the next millennium. It's early days for him though, so don't expect sweeping changes yet: "Launching a television channel has kept me kind of busy the past few weeks. And the BBC has the country's most popular content website - that means some of our processes are actually working, so I'm not going to change everything for the sake of it.

"We'll try to run it with as few people as possible on the commissioning side and spend as much



TULLY CHANDRY/BBC ARIEL

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of our budget as possible getting pixels on screens." And with former Online head Ed Briffa having spent an estimated £30 million to create a site that cost 20 times more than equivalent sites per page, Drori's assurances are all the more important to those worried about seeing the BBC get value from the licence fee.

So who will Drori commission to produce content for the site: Online or indies? Drori admits that, with his Broadcast hat on, he wants to build a close relationship with Production - and he sees the need for the BBC to develop its own web skills. But, "we want to represent all parts of UK and get good value for money. One reason for commissioning from outside the BBC is it gets us good value. We'll try to in the medium- and long-term, though we might not be able to do it initially."

He visualises a "command economy" in which some things are opened up to tenders while other ▶

content is commissioned directly from specific people, either inside or outside the BBC. "We might make the commissioning process clearer and more public, both internally and to independent companies, so they know what things are worth pitching for. One of the things I've learned about the web is that you need clear structures in the way you commission material."

But Drori sees no clear-cut link between the BBC's broadcast output and Online's content. Not only would online content for every programme be hard to navigate - like a "very difficult listings magazine" - but it would date quickly; gone are the days when series would get their own websites purely as vanity publishing.

Instead, he sees two kinds of commissioning: one working closely with Broadcast commissioners for certain kinds of integrated projects (much as Knowledge tries to coordinate transmitted programmes with online back-up material), and another where the broadcast material and online material, while they're aware of each other, aren't actually linked.

"A viewer of *Tomorrow's World* might find general science information interesting, or even Peter Snow telling his personal stories, but if the show

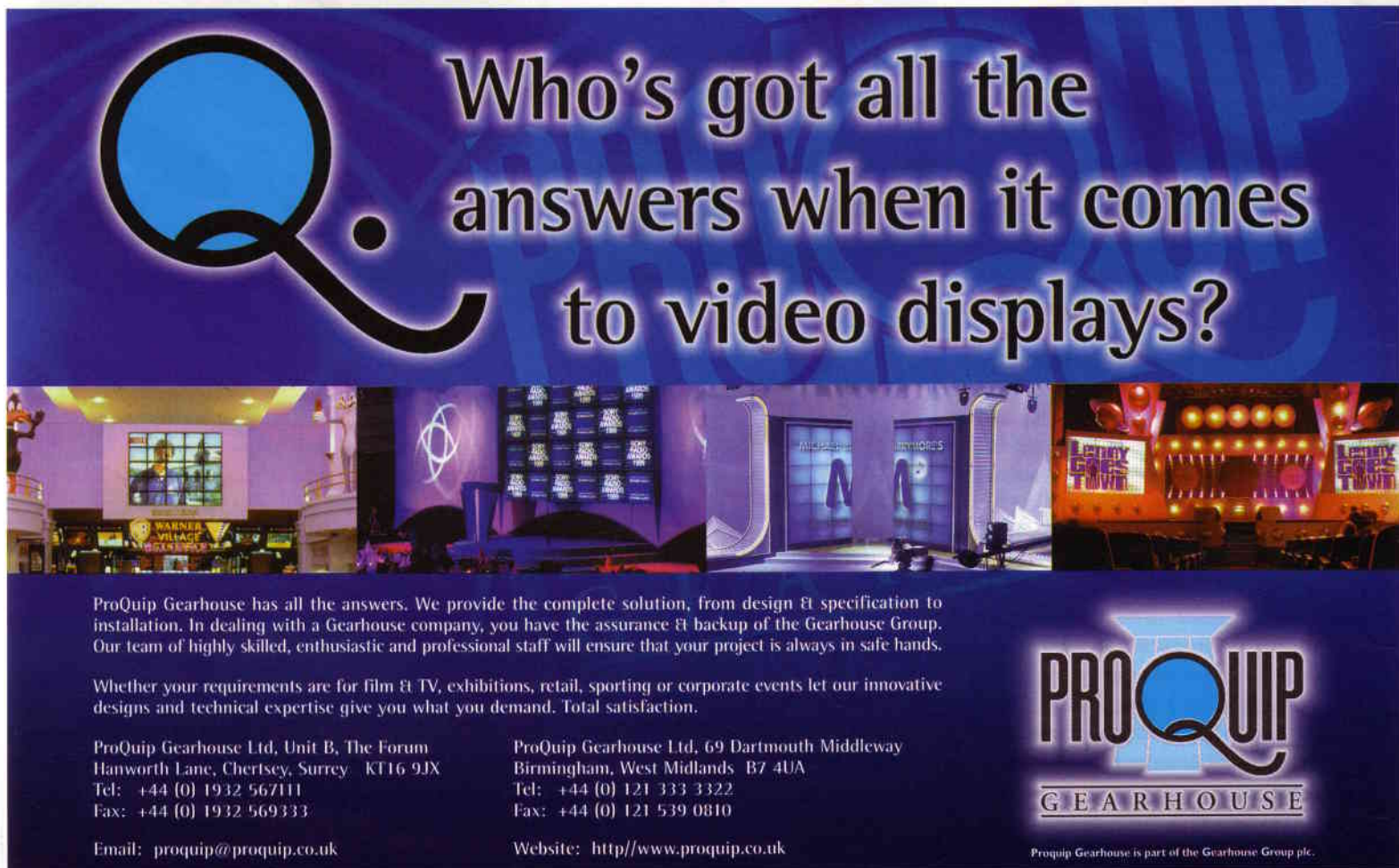
didn't happen one week, that information would still be useful. In Education, we've designed all the material for a very long life and many of our sites have long lives - sometimes extending quite a long time after the television programme has aired."

One of the first potential commissioning opportunities is the "major enhancement" of the site that Drori has promised to coincide with turn-of-the-century celebrations. "I don't want to give away exactly what we're going to do, because it will take away from the element of delicious surprise the audience will have when we tell them. But they're the kind of things you would expect from the really big, public-service, mega-corporation that we are."

The BBC has received considerable criticism for dedicating so much of the licence fee (approximately 1%) to something perceived as a "male and up-market" preserve. So how does Drori square Online with the BBC's public-service commitment? "It's the kind of question we ask ourselves a lot. But the amount of money anyone now needs to get online, especially with free internet access as well as cheap computers, is pretty small. There's been a big shift in the demographic: it's going to become pretty ubiquitous."

Access from public libraries and through electronic devices other than PCs, such as set-top boxes or even games consoles, will help. And to increase access for the disabled, Online is trialling a web-based sign-language project to see how much data is needed to produce good signs over the web (though those who can hear might expect the deaf to be able to read web pages without difficulty, "people who use sign language don't necessarily speak English") and Betsie - BBC Education Text-to-Speech Internet Enhancer - a system that reads out web pages to the blind. A "magic moment" for Drori was when David Blunkett was able to use the system to surf the web.

In five years' time, however, Drori believes the very notion of online will be passé. "People won't even think of it as being online: it'll just be video-on-demand integrated with interactivity" - a view that places him at odds with broadcasters and online trailblazers before him, who have downplayed the likelihood of VOD taking off. And for the commissioner of BBC Online, the end of the segregation of the web from TV could mean just "a couple of geeky guys on the west coast of California" developing the web-specific content, while Online will be "everything in between..." ■



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