



[HOME](#) | [PHOTOGRAPHY](#) | [WRITING ▼](#) | [AUDIO ▼](#) | [TV](#) |

[SPORT](#) | [CONTACT](#) |

WRITTEN BY ADAMBOWIE • OCTOBER 4, 2009 • MEDIA, MISC

Content

Warning. You are about to read a bit of a rant: if you haven't already stopped reading already that is. It's been a long time in coming, but I feel I have to say something about it.

I loathe content.

The word “content” that is.

I really, *really* loathe it.

It's a hideous and yet all encompassing word.



At first it was just the by now omnipresent “User Generated Content”. But now websites are filled with “content”. TV schedules are now packed with “content”. Radio stations use “content” to fill the airtime. Newspapers and magazine are stuffed with “content”. It’s everywhere.

Like many words, it started out as an industry specific word. Marketing types would talk about the content they were producing for their new project. That was frustrating, but marketing is full of nonsense (apologies for causing offence to any marketing professionals reading this – but you know I’m speaking the truth). Yet slowly it’s become one of those words that’s seeped out of the confines of the marketing universe and has begun to permeate society. “Premium” is a word that has similarly escaped the clutches of the marketing world and broken free into *our* world. We all now know that a “premium lager” is somehow better than a regular one. The ads are glossier; the image more refined; and the product more expensive. But it’s brewed in the same facility in South Wales or wherever. Nobody can actually really explain what’s so “premium” about it. They might say that they like it more, but advertising has largely conditioned them to do so. And there are plenty of other examples. Thus you’ll now see consumer-facing websites talking about “content” quite openly – especially if you’re invited to upload pictures, audio or video. But you’ll also hear the word spoken and used in this sense on television and radio.

Content, I’m reliably informed, is from the Latin, *contentum*, the neuter past participle of *continere* meaning “to contain”. Google cites something like 1.4bn mentions of the word.

Dictionary.com’s [definition](#) is probably as good as any:

4. substantive information or creative material viewed in contrast to its actual or potential manner of presentation: publishers, record companies, and other content providers; a flashy Web site, but without much content.

(I’d use the OED’s definition, but it’s all behind a paywall).

So why do I hate the word? It's a word that's not easily replaceable in the context in which it's currently used, because it can mean so many things: video, audio, written pieces, or combinations thereof. As a catchall, then, does it not serve a purpose?

Yet that's precisely what really annoys me about the word.

It takes that art out of those things. If I'm writing an essay on a subject, is this a carefully crafted literary piece or is it a piece of "content"? If I'm composing a new song, am I just making some "content"? If I'm making a film with a crew, and some actors, have I really just put together "content"?

In the context of the word's definition, then yes I have. But the word is somehow dismissive. It doesn't consider the thought, time, or creativity (or lack of) that went into producing the work or works. Barbie Girl by Aqua and A Day In The Life by The Beatles are somehow equal because they're both just "content". Saw VI and Lawrence of Arabia are the same. A throw away piece of tittle-tattle from The Sun's Bizarre column is the same as a 1500 word essay in the Times Literary Supplement. It's all "content".

It probably doesn't help that the word sounds a little like "cement", because when I hear someone talk about content – perhaps on a website – then I think about someone trying to shovel oozing piles of something into the website so that it'll quickly set and there's something there for people to read, watch or listen to. It's not a stunning piece of hand crafted masonry. It's a breeze block. There's no real thought about the quality of what's being uploaded or written; just the knowledge that some of it's needed to attract readers, viewers or listeners. There is space or airtime to fill, and on the internet, that space is effectively infinite, while in the broadcasting world you can always start a new channel or stream.

It's simple economics. And of course that's what the media industry is all about. With the exception (perhaps!) of the BBC, all that filler material is just there to turn a buck for the company who has to fill it. That's fine. We live in a capitalist world. But surely we *care* about how we fill those empty spaces? And that to me is the problem with the word "content." It suggests an attitude that just requires taking the most cost effective way to fill in the gaps.

Am I an idealist? I'm well aware that commissioning editors for daytime TV are just trying to fill the gaps in their schedule as cost effectively as possible. They need a decent audience share to maintain their positions, and reap the maximum value of the associated advertising.

To take an easy example, nobody really hand-crafts an episode of the Jeremy Kyle Show. They don't care. They just know that the network wants x hours of shows a year, and they just churn them out as quickly and cost-effectively as possible. Think of that cement mixer again, pulling up at a studio in Manchester and just dumping its load.

Similarly, the producers of Big Brother and Channel 4 know that they have to produce hours of footage to fill out much of Quarter Two and Three's primetime schedule. Yes, they want to maximise the audience – but that's not really the same as caring about the programmes they make. Perhaps in these instances "content" is, then, an accurate word.

Closer to home, commercial radio has to achieve maximum revenues for minimal costs. It does this largely by playing music; in many cases, the same music. The listener is left with soundalike stations across the country. Indeed they're now quite likely to be 100% identical.

But does that mean that we shouldn't at least aspire to greater things?

The reality is that some standards have to be maintained if you want to stand out and make an impact. However dire some of ITV's comedy and drama series

might be, I don't believe the makers didn't really care at least a little bit about them (OK – the producers of The Palace last year probably didn't).

That's not to say that slick machines can't operate, producing television programmes by the mile, but maintaining a certain quality threshold. The CSI franchise springs to mind with some excellent production values maintained, even if a few scripts do seem to have jumped the shark. House is now in its sixth series, having made well over 100 episodes, yet the quality of scripts remains impressive. It can be done.

I suppose I get upset when I hear people throwing the word “content” around as though people will come flocking to read, listen or view it, irrespective of what it is. Pile it high and they will come!

And so, every website in the known universe has rushed to include “User Generated Content” in their sites! Sometimes it's very appropriate – Flickr obviously wouldn't exist without its users photos, although YouTube could probably do with a little more *user* generated “content”, and less *broadcaster* created “content”. But mostly it's just another bandwagon that most have failed to climb on.

What I do agree with is that we need a word to use to talk about all this material; preferably a word that doesn't conjour up an image of a builder shoveling cement from a wheelbarrow into a hole to fill it up. Because that's what I picture in my mind's eye when I hear someone discussing how they need content to fill a hole in their schedule/pages/site. Cement is readily available in vast quantities from your local builders' yard.

Please give me an alternative; a word that conveys some care and consideration has gone into what has been created. And in the meantime, feel free to tell me off if I ever use the word.

The usual disclaimer – these are my personal opinions and do not represent those of my employer. And yes, I have, in extremis, used “content” before, quite probably on this very blog. But I try not to. I really do.

Previous Story:

SMART SCHEDULING DECISIONS

Next Story:

WATCHING FOOTBALL ON THE INTERNET

5 REPLIES TO “CONTENT”



Daniel Owen

October 4, 2009 at 22:25

I’m concerned about you, Adam. You don’t seem very content.

James Merritt

October 5, 2009 at 15:20

Nice bit of content!



Adam Bowie

October 5, 2009 at 15:43

Keep those puns coming...

Lali Parikh*October 5, 2009 at 16:38*

Even worse, here its not only referred to as Content, but Assets and even worse products.

Lali Parikh*October 5, 2009 at 16:39*

Even worse, here its not only referred to as Content, but Assets and even worse products.

RECENT POSTS

Bewilderment by Richard Powers September 21, 2021

Beautiful World, Where Are You by Sally Rooney September 21, 2021

Squeeze Me by Carl Hiaasen/The Law of Innocence by Michael Connelly
September 21, 2021

A Master of Djinn by P. Djèlí Clark September 21, 2021

90s MTB to Singlespeed Conversion September 20, 2021

The Antisocial Network by Ben Mezrich September 20, 2021

The Man Who Died Twice by Richard Osman August 25, 2021

Plot by Jean Hanff Korelitz August 13, 2021

Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson August 12, 2021

Billy Summers by Stephen King August 12, 2021

TWITTER

- Chapeau Julian! What an incredible race. #UCIWorldChampionships4
hours ago
- Quite a payoff at the end... <https://t.co/WUJePNNhrF>*yesterday*
- This is a really fascinating piece of work. What I especially found interesting was that the public finds many more...
<https://t.co/BFf5eux8nu4>*4 days ago*

RECENT COMMENTS

adambowie on Losing 56 kg / 9 stone / 124 lbs Over a Year

PC on Losing 56 kg / 9 stone / 124 lbs Over a Year

Sarah S on Losing 56 kg / 9 stone / 124 lbs Over a Year

adambowie on Losing 56 kg / 9 stone / 124 lbs Over a Year

Nick Hill on Losing 56 kg / 9 stone / 124 lbs Over a Year



RSS FEED



TWITTER



FLICKR



INSTAGRAM



YOUTUBE



VIMEO



LINKEDIN

[Home](#)

[Photography](#)

[Writing](#)

[Audio](#)

[TV](#)

[Sport](#)

[Contact](#)