**Transcript for Digital Culture Podcast Episode Two – Digital Marketing and Strategy with Ollie Couling**

**James Akers:** Welcome to the Digital Culture Podcast, a podcast for people working in the creative and cultural sector who want to know more about digital. I'm your host, James Akers.

Welcome to the second episode of the Digital Culture Podcast. If you work in the creative and cultural sector and you could be working in a museum, a theater, maybe a library, or you're an individual practitioner or artist, you're in the right place. We are here to help you with your digital journeys.

So we have a team of Tech Champions at the Digital Culture Network, and I'm one of them. I'm James, the tech champion for data analytics and insight, and I'm currently in my blue room in Preston. I'm a white man who's just turned 42. And I've got brown hair and I've got a pink jumper on today. And my guest today is part of the 1982 crew.

It's Ollie Couling, our strategy Tech Champion.

**Ollie Couling:** Hello! I am Ollie Couling, the Tech Champion for digital marketing and strategy, also 42 and wearing a rather fetching woollen flat cap and a blue shirt. And I'm a white male.

**James Akers:** And you're looking very dapper today, aren't you?

**Ollie Couling:** I made an effort for you James.

**James Akers:** Thank you so much. And whereabouts in the country are you based, Ollie?

**Ollie Couling:** Sat in my house in Bristol.

**James Akers:** Brilliant. And we're recording this on the 13th of December 2024, so it's the end of the year. And preparing for next year, a great person to speak to is Ollie because it's all about strategy. So thinking about your year ahead and the things that you might want to plan. That's where Ollie comes in.

 And that's what we're going to talk about today. So I thought what we could start off with is firstly a describing what your role is as a Tech Champion and the kind of support you help people with and then we can go on to the scary word of strategy.

**Ollie Couling:** It's not a scary word. It's a great word. Tech Champions, we are, a bunch of very passionate individuals who are here to support you realize your ambitions, whatever they may be.

 I guess day to day, the majority of work that we do is one to one support with organizations across England. And it's very much an opportunity for people to have some time really to think about. yeah, their wider plans to look at things in a bit more detail and to have someone there to help them along the way.

So that's what a Tech Champion is.

**James Akers:** And how long have you been with the team now?

**Ollie Couling:** I have been with the team for coming up to three years. So yeah, I think I've nearly hit 500 cases. So it's, yeah it's quite a lot of time speaking with people and getting to grips of this and understanding what it means to do this role.

 It's great. I love it.

**James Akers:** So on to strategy then. Looking through the different types of support that you've had over the last three years and nearly 500 cases you've had, it goes in various different areas. So when people talk about strategy, it seems to be, the initial thought is a whole massive thing that's very complex and it should just be done at the people higher up in the organisation.

But looking at the cases and support that you've had over the last three years, it's a mix, isn't it? It's not massive strategies, it's sometimes small strategies, and it's sometimes different areas as well. So you've got social strategies or marketing strategies versus digital strategies. Can you explain a bit about that and what the difference is between them?

**Ollie Couling:** So I guess. in a nutshell, a strategy is simply just a way to move from A to B in the most effective way, deploying your resources to have the biggest impact and to position yourself in a place of opportunity, so the A to B bit, is your reality to B is, what you're trying to achieve and that could be anything like you say it could be a huge organizational wide 10 year plan, but it could also be like I said a way of gaining traction on social media, or achieving a certain number of Followers, or it could be anything really so it's just the how you do it how you get from A to B but there's a lot, there's a lot of kind of things wrapped up in that.

But it's yeah, what you said earlier about digital strategy and digital marketing, that's a good thing to talk about because digital strategy and digital marketing do get bundled together sometimes, whereas they should probably should be somewhat separated. Digital marketing, obviously about the promotion of things, digital strategies, more, more about how your organization transforms into a new space through digital technologies.

But digital transformation, actually any type of strategy, to be honest, it's very much about the people. It's a people problem in the heart of it really. So I think that's a good reminder any strategy you're talking about has to involve people doing it. One thing I always like to try and do if I can, it's not always possible, but I guess trying to boil down the root of the problem into something that's quite easy for everyone to understand.

So a strategy can, if you can get to the place where you come up with a one line statement that describes your strategy, that is the kind of gold standard in my opinion. It's not always possible, but it can be done. And yeah, I think that to me, that's a really effective strategy. One that everybody understands, everyone can get behind and they just go do it.

**James Akers:** Nice. And is that similar to when we think about like vision statements and mission statements, they're usually one sentence objective of why something exists.

And a strategy is below that. Obviously it's something that's trying to achieve those aims, but it's still a one liner.

**Ollie Couling:** Yeah. It can be a one line statement that describes what you're trying to do. What is the route forward? What is the opportunity? How are we going to deploy our forces to get there? But obviously within that, it probably requires a plan because we're working with so many moving parts. So the strategy is the kind of the idea, the concept, the theory of how you get there.

Then the plan is the, the nuts and bolts of this happens first, this happens next. We need, we move this, we move three feet forward here and slightly to the left and that's how we, that's how we get there. But yeah I as you probably know, James, I'm, I slightly obsessed over words and I think I think language is so integral to this idea of strategy.

And I, think a massive part of it is just getting the words right to describe what it is you're trying to do. The words you use and kind of spending time to articulate things well is so important. And I think if one, one takeaway is just to spend time really figuring out what the words are.

**James Akers:** I think that really helps everybody involved. I've seen things like that before. we want to engage everybody. Yeah. A, it's not very specific, is it?

**Ollie Couling:** Engagement is a word I hear every day and every time I hear it I'm like, what does engagement mean to you? What is the definition of engagement? So yeah it's stuff like that, unpicking those words and turning it, turning them into reasons and ideas and concepts you can work with and you can understand.

Because I don't understand what engagement means when you say I want to engage someone.

**James Akers:** Is that how a one to one case with you goes? So someone has a call with you, and it's like a video chat like this, and they will say, Hey. We're trying to achieve this thing. Our main vision statement is that we're here to engage the local audiences where we live with art, for example, and we just need help formalizing that in a digital strategy way.

**Ollie Couling:** I think probably there are many organizations who have a really strong and clear vision. and mission, and they just know what they want to do, but they just need help figuring out how within their capacity and their resources, or if they're, they've hit a bit of a sticky area and they need help getting over that hurdle.

That's a big part of it. But I do I do find that quite a lot of the time people come to me with a specific problem or a specific idea of what they're, what they want. But actually, if you start asking questions, just asking why, just why are you doing it, you can quite quickly understand that perhaps what they think they need isn't what they really need or what is going to be the most beneficial to them.

Quite a lot of cases are about I need to increase my social media followers and it's just the first question is why? What's the outcome that will have? So when you start asking those questions you get back to the start and you understand that there are other things that need to happen as well and there are bigger picture opportunities or problems that need answering alongside that idea of also just increasing your followers. So that's a big part of what I do. I guess it's challenging people actually and yeah, a lot of what I do is just to challenge some of these ideas and I do find that can be difficult, sometimes, but most of the time people really appreciate being challenged and if you do point out these like sticky things It really does make people think and answer their own problems. And that's what I'm trying to do every day is not answer the problem. I don't know your, what you do every day.

I'm just here to point some stuff out. So if I can do that, I feel like that's a successful interaction. Going back to the beginning when you talked about what is a Tech Champion, I think. if anything, we're like space holders. We hold the space for people to figure stuff out for themselves.

Obviously there's technical things like probably you're much more technical than me. I'm all kind of hippie, dippy, blue sky thinking most of the time.

**James Akers:** Yeah.

**Ollie Couling:** Just holding the space and unlocking these like this kind of tunnel vision that often people find themselves in is I think, quite a lot more what I do, I think, actually.

**James Akers:** There's a lot of channelling that goes back to you. When we speak to people, so like my area, as you say, quite technical in a lot of ways, a lot of the technical elements of marketing and setup and integrations and all those kinds of things. And some of those things are right to do. They're fundamental things that everybody should do of getting your house in order in that way. But sometimes we do get people come in and they want to achieve something really specific and when we ask a question and going how does that tie back to your vision statement? How do you exist? Why are you going down this channel? And the response is, oh either my boss told me to, or we thought it was the right thing to do. And that's where sometimes it's worthwhile to put them in touch with you to then have that discussion. And it can be people lower down in the organization.

So people that are doing, the actual, the graft. And it doesn't have to be people right up at the top it doesn't have to be the leaders because it does help doesn't it have that discussion about how you can take something back to senior leadership and help the organization improve in that way.

**Ollie Couling:** I think that's a really good point.

When people come to us and have to communicate plans upwards to their seniors, I think a big part of the job that needs to be done there is around turning these strategies into something that feels real, so creating that narrative and I think that's where me and you link quite a lot in our specialisms is you're the data guy, the data is there to tell the story, to create that narrative, and I suppose my job is to help people make the strategies feel real.

So what is the benefit? Why are we doing it? What's the purpose? What's it going to achieve? And what kind of impact is it going to have more widely, not just on, your specific area. and it's also really good if we can have meetings where the manager and the director are both on the same call together.

I can see the benefit of that and I feel like there's a better understanding of each other's challenges and each other's expectations as well. When you're talking about things together and I love doing those calls where there's more than one person on the call.

I think it's really helpful.

**James Akers:** They can be one to many with these calls. Some people, when they're booking in with us, they're like, oh, can I bring my colleague along? It's yes, absolutely. We love it when that happens.

**Ollie Couling:** Yeah, I'd always encourage more people to come. It's, Zoom and Teams are so easy to facilitate that. Yeah, definitely. And, I love an in person workshop, actually. We can't do them all the time, but when, whenever we can, I do try and get out and about and get in a room with people.

I think a lot more can happen in the time that way. writing things down, sticking up loads of post it notes.

**James Akers:** Being that you've had 500 cases, are there any top tips that you would like people to think about when it comes to strategy?

I think, I guess this might be an observation rather than a tip, but I'd say if you're doing things and you don't know why you're doing them, my advice to you would be just to stop.

**Ollie Couling:** That's my tip because if you don't really know the purpose of what you're doing, we need to understand why, and if you can take time to understand why, I think everything you do beyond that is going to be more useful, more impactful, more efficient more aligned more relevant.

Yeah stop. It's fine to stop Zoom out a minute reflect and that's what the DCN is really useful for just having that moment to pause. That's probably my top tip but these might not be I guess what you're expecting in terms of recommendations, but I think just be curious I think strategy people like asking difficult questions and like challenging and asking why.

Be curious, always ask lots of questions, follow tangents, I guess strategy people are like detectives in a way, you pick up a clue and you're like, Ooh, what does that, what, what does what does that mean? That's interesting.

Let's go down that rabbit hole for a little bit. Let's explore that idea. That comes from curiosity, I think and try things. Take risks I'm gonna hark back to a workshop we were both at recently while over in New York, which was amazing with a guy called George gave an amazing workshop about risk.

And the thing that sticks with me about taking risks was he said, what's the risk if you don't do it? And I love that. I've been thinking about that ever since. It's burnt in my mind now. Yeah, what is the risk of not doing it? If you're ever worried about trying new things, ask yourself the question.

What is the risk if you don't do it? And I think that really opens you up to, exploring new ideas. I think there is a bit of a myth or a bit of a kind of, attitude in marketing generally around data, and this is probably going to be completely against your ideas, James, but I'm gonna go with it anyway, but I think data is the enabler to something.

It's not the answer to something. So like exploring that idea a little bit. We have all this data, all this historic data. It's great. It helps us make decisions, but it shouldn't be the thing that makes the decision. It should be the thing that kind of starts the conversation or creates a hypothesis or, you use to make some assumptions, the assumption making the kind of hypothesis making, that's the strategy bit.

The data is there to help you shape your decisions and not to tell you what to do. Because if you think about that logically, If you're only working on data from the past, that's creating its own kind of feedback loop in itself. You need to go out there.

You need to think of new things and get creative . So yeah, I went on a bit of a rant there, but be curious.

**James Akers:** I completely agree with you with the data stuff. There is so much historical data. And obviously the last five years have been all over the place when it comes to certain things as well. But it gives you a benchmark. And that's the most important thing. If you've got a benchmark with some of the things that you're trying to achieve, at least you can see if things are either improving or not.

And that's something to use within all the different strategies that you're looking to do.

**Ollie Couling:** Yeah, adding to that as well, like the idea of goals, I think goals in strategy and objectives do worry people often. And I say this a lot in calls actually on support cases is the goal is really just a kind of marker for you to aim for, the benefit of having one is that it sets you up for

 checking in on yourself and checking your homework. So the goal really just allows you to create a process for you to understand if things are working or not. I've worked in so many organizations where the goalposts change every month. And actually the, if you think about it, the goal is never enough.

When you hit that target, there'll just be another one after that. So It's not about the goal, it's about the process. I think.

**James Akers:** I can understand where like a certain financial goal is obviously important,

people would need to be paid. But other things when it comes to other areas of strategy completely.

Linked to what we were just saying about objectives and goals There are certain frameworks that you use and share with people when you're speaking to them, would you like to talk a little bit about those?

**Ollie Couling:** Frameworks are super important. They're really helpful to visualize what it is you're trying to do. I guess with stuff like that, I keep changing the ones I use often, but I was. I was a big fan of the theory of change model for a long time. I think it's great when you're starting out from scratch to understand, kind of work backwards from the impact or the vision.

Think about what the outcomes are, and then understand what has to go in order to get the output you need. That's the theory of change is like a kind of linear way of thinking about your strategy and the strategy is what comes at the very beginning to feed the input that creates an output that achieves the outcome that realizes the vision.

So theory of change is a great model for anyone thinking about very long term objectives and thinking about impact and change over a long period of time. So I'd highly recommend looking into that theory of change. It's quite often like a very businessy tool, but I think it can work really well for marketing people because what I think it does, the power of using it for marketing, is that if you can understand what the outputs are that you're, you need to create or produce in order to have the outcome you want, what that does is it actually generates some really good, salient, powerful, potent messaging because you really know what you're trying to achieve. It's really focused. So in terms of then creating a message that goes back into in front of the eyes of the people, the right people, it's like very direct.

So I like it for that reason. The objectives and key results model is good. I think it's really simple and really neat and tidy. So that's just basically, you have an objective, which could be, I'd like to do this thing. And then you put the key results of what it takes to do that underneath.

 And then underneath that, it's like just a list of activities and initiatives that you think you need to put in place in order to realize or to meet those goals. So that's a nice tidy one, useful for writing a strategy document. I think they're quite nice to include in a document use the MoSCoW prioritization tool a lot.

I find that really useful. It's again. It's quite simple MoSCoW stands for must have, should have, could have, won't have. So it's a way of quickly prioritizing lots of things and this is very common. Say you're the marketing manager and you've been asked to look after comms paid social Organic social, email newsletters, all these things at once if there's a goal and you need to quickly figure out what my priorities are for the next month or six months you could drop them into these buckets of; we must have this because without it won't work, we should have this because it has benefits. We could have this if we have enough time, we don't need this because actually, everything else is enough. And I like to use that model alongside the idea of the like the 80 20. So 80%

 of your power often comes from 20 percent of your activities. So that's an interesting concept to think about. And it's strangely true. I think it often works out that way. So if you can find where the power's coming from that 20 percent of your time, if you can lean into that, make more of that, and you naturally get more power from doing kind of almost less.

I did do a webinar about that one.

**James Akers:** Yeah, it was good.

Speaking of which, aside from the one to one cases that you have and the way you support people individually, you do webinars and resources as well and articles. So you've had a recent one about content strategy development, so aligning your content with a marketing funnel. That was really interesting.

**Ollie Couling:** I know you love a funnel, James.

**James Akers:** I love a funnel.

**Ollie Couling:** And do you know what? That webinar was very much adding to your webinar around why are you measuring that? Which was looking at funnels. So it was a part two from your one. And yeah the marketing funnel is great. Particularly for content, I think, for planning your content.

I guess to summarize what that does, the marketing funnel is a way of creating a process or a plan that takes people who are unengaged with you or do not know about you through to a, some sort of conversion. So that conversion could be. It could be anything. It could be clicking a button on a website, it could be buying a ticket. It could be signing up to a newsletter. It can be anything, but it's the process and the kind of touch points that you put in place to nudge someone along from being completely unaware to being a customer,

**James Akers:** Yeah, because it takes multiple interactions to get to that stage, doesn't it?

**Ollie Couling:** Yeah, completely. I think Nick and Katie said this in the previous podcast, there's this expectation that you put a message out or put an advert out and expect someone to just instantly act, but it doesn't work like that. People need warming up.

And I think the funnel is a way of making your work connect with people to inspire that action that you want them to take eventually, but just don't expect it to happen immediately. Warm them up get them to this point and then yeah, see what happens after that. So go watch the webinar.

**James Akers:** So if you want to watch that webinar, just go to digitalculturenetwork. org. uk and go to the Knowledge Hub and all of our past webinars are on there and you'll be able to find it.

Speaking of the Knowledge Hub, over the last three years you've written lots of articles about different topics, and your most recent one is an interview with Mary Spender about reaching three quarters of a million subscribers

**Ollie Couling:** Yes, I did. I interviewed George Spender, Mary's brother who I met at an event in Bristol and we started chatting and turns out that he's the brains behind this massive YouTube channel. And it's really over the last two years, I think it's really kicked off and Mary Spender has I think she's reached 90 million views in total it's crazy big anyway, but it was really interesting to talk to George about his process and some of his recommendations for managing and getting the most out of that channel. You put me on the spot here, but I can't remember some of the takeaways, but what I do remember was about the idea of not chasing trends. They were very sure about that idea.

They didn't want to do reaction videos and follow the trends because they wanted the content to feel evergreen and they wanted to create this bigger body of work. Another thing that definitely worked they very much encouraged was the idea of collaboration with other Influences, particularly when you're starting out, it's a really good way to gain traction gain momentum.

But yeah go check out the YouTube channel. I think they actually run some training courses on how to make the most out of YouTube. So go check out their website. All the links are there. Yeah, really smart people. And I do think from the sounds of it creating that quantity of content.

On such a regular basis is quite hard going though So I think mary's built a team around her to basically make her life as easy as possible so she can just do the content worry about that and all the other stuff is taken care of. They're in a I guess a position of privilege now of being able to do that, but there's a lot of content, I think they're trying to put two or three videos out a week. And it's that kind of frequency is a big part of kicking in the algorithm to promote you and all those things.

Yeah, they're definitely playing into the algorithm, but also doing their own thing at the same time, which I really respect.

I'd like to do more of those articles actually.

**James Akers:** I think it's good for us to be the people asking the questions rather than telling people what to do. It's good to hear how people are doing it for themselves. I wouldn't necessarily say I'm an expert in those things anymore. But we can go ask a question. So I think that's a good interaction in my opinion.

It's a really good practical example, and that's what we're all about, isn't it?

Practical examples and techniques and, taking people on that journey. It's all about, developing skills in the creative and cultural sector in England. So this is one way of doing it, isn't it? By showcasing those things.

 Over the last three years, have you seen a shift in any requests when it comes to strategy, or are there any common things that you want to highlight for anybody listening?

**Ollie Couling:** I feel like strategy hasn't, I'm probably going to dig a hole here for myself, but I feel like the strategy is more about the kind of process of how you go about thinking about it. Because everybody's situation is going to be unique. Therefore, there's no silver bullet really. I think. I've noticed people coming along to calls with a much stronger idea of what their vision is and what their values are. I think that's really good. That's really helpful. Like strong values and strong identity is a powerful thing to have. I think it gives you a lot of resilience and relevance that you can use.

So that's definitely a bit of a shift. I've definitely seen more recently a few, I quite often get asked to kind of review documents and kind of comment on, on them just to sense check if they're looking okay. And I think particularly in the last three to six months, I have noticed there have been AI generated strategies that like they're very kind of formulaic and templated.

That's quite interesting. They come out pretty good, but I feel there's always going to be the question around how realistic your plans are based on your own situation. So that's something that AI can't do. And I think that's where I've had to kind of chip in mostly around those things, just questioning some of the goals, KPIs and ideas around can you actually do this?

**James Akers:**

You mentioned at the beginning about being human centered and it's people that are doing these things. And if it's an AI writing it, how does that know?

**Ollie Couling:** I think it gets you pretty far, but you spend a lot of time changing it. because you just have to backtrack on everything to just check how you can do it. So pros and cons, but that I have noticed a few more coming, coming through that look quite similar.

**James Akers:** So as we're at the end of the year in 2024, is there anything coming up ahead on the horizon that you want to talk about?

**Ollie Couling:** Oh as a strategist, I probably should have more things to say. But I think, who knows? All I know is that sooner or later something new will come along and we're gonna have to change again. So that's my horizon scan.

**James Akers:** be open to change. Yeah, things will change.

Okay,

 So before I wrap things up, I just thought I'd ask you if there's any, if you had like a favourite one to one support case over the last six months that you want to highlight or talk about?

**Ollie Couling:** I couldn't say they're all

I invest quite heavily into, supporting everyone. So I couldn't do that. There's been interesting cases particularly around people who are quite reluctant to use digital things, so they've been interesting, and how they've gone around achieving what they wanted to set out to do without using digital media, which I find really interesting not for everyone obviously, but yeah, I couldn't pick a favourite.

It's very difficult.

**James Akers:** It's like picking a favourite child, isn't it?

**Ollie Couling:** Yeah, a little bit. No, they're all great. And I think it's just brilliant how enthusiastic and energetic people are about trying to make the arts and cultural sector a better place. Everyone's a champion in that regard.

**James Akers:** What a beautiful way to finish the podcast.

**Ollie Couling:** Ah.

**James Akers:** Thanks for joining us on this second episode of the Digital Culture Podcast with my guest Ollie Couling.

**Ollie Couling:** Thanks James, it's been a pleasure.

**James Akers:** We're here to help. So if you are working in a non profit organisation in England, in the creative and cultural sector, or you're an individual artist. You can get free one to one support from us at the Digital Culture Network. So please do get in touch. Everything's on our website at digitalculturenetwork. org. uk.