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SOARING AMBITIONS

What the rise of MediaCityUK and the arrival of the BBC means for the North West digital sector

AGENCY ANGELS

Heads of leading digital agencies reveal how being in the North West benefits their business

TALENT SCOUTS

Major brands from the region and beyond find all the creative skills they need in North West agencies

GAME BEATERS

How Liverpool and Manchester have become renowned as world leaders in games and animation

There's still a year to go before the £500m MediaCityUK development in Salford Quays welcomes its most famous resident. But operations on the site are already up and running. In May, developer Peel Media handed over the last of the three buildings in phase one of the project that will house the BBC. These are now being fitted out, with the first wave of the 2,500 staff making the move from London due next spring. But everyone, including the Corporation, is keen to stress that MediaCityUK isn't just about the BBC.

"The key message is that this is the new home for broadcasting and content creation in the UK," says Jason Legget, head of business development at Peel Media. "There are already clear projects emerging out of MediaCityUK."

There's already TV production going on on-site. The Pie Factory, a former frozen-food manufacturing plant, now hosts 16 production companies. The University of Salford will create a higher education centre to serve more than 800 students, with the first intake due in autumn 2011. And among the projects to which Legget refers are a research initiative called Framework for Innovation and Research in MediaCity

(FIRM), a digital content laboratory, a games centre of excellence and Make Media, a national centre for community media which is the result of a partnership between the Community Media Association, Radio Regen, Creative Industry in Salford and the Media Trust.

"All these projects will give MediaCityUK something over and above the built environment," says Legget, "something that will help bring in other companies."

All these projects will be housed in the Media Enterprise Centre, funded by the NWDA and due to open next summer. It will offer a business accelerator service, office space, training facilities and a research and innovation centre, as well as being one of the access points to the NorthernNet high-speed network. This will link 17 media access bureaux via a fibre-optic network offering speeds of 100Mbps, and is seen as crucial to allowing small and independent production companies the sort of connection speed available to the majors.

Meanwhile FIRM, a collaboration between the BBC, Cambridge University, Goldsmiths University, Lancaster University, MIT, Salford University and Vision+Media, aims to

create a network of universities around MediaCityUK. It's intended to deliver research collaborations between industry and universities, employing 30 researchers in the North West and 180 across the UK.

The third project, the Make Media centre, is described by Legget as "a social media playground where consumers of content become creators". It'll offer production, TV and radio studio facilities for schools and community groups, as well as training and development and a lab.

Evolutionary step

But as phase one comes to an end next spring, all eyes are on MediaCityUK's anchor tenant, the BBC. The Corporation is moving five departments up from London: Sport, Children's, Learning, Radio 5 Live and Future Media & Technology. It's also transferring its local and network broadcasting currently based in central Manchester. In total, about half of the staff of the departments moving from London have agreed to relocate. The rest are being recruited from across the North.

According to a BBC spokesman, MediaCityUK is seen within the broadcaster as the next logical step in its evolution – from Broadcasting

The first tenants are already operating out of MediaCityUK, the high-tech business complex in Manchester's Salford Quays. With BBC staff expected next spring, Michael Nutley asks how the development and the Corporation's arrival will guide the region

Lighting the way



◀ 2,500 BBC staff are relocating from London but the broadcaster isn't the only highlight of the development



House in the days of radio, to TV Centre for television and now MediaCityUK for converged content. But it's also an opportunity to introduce a new way of working. A new commissioning approach is being set up, known as @North, based on a more collaborative model. It will make £500,000 available to commission up to four pilots of interactive content for CBeebies and CBBC, and is being run in partnership with three of the regional screen agencies: Northern Film & Media, Screen Yorkshire and Vision+Media.

Announcing the initiative at the Media Festival in Manchester last November, the director of BBC North Peter Salmon described it as "a chance for the BBC to be more open, more collaborative and to support the wider media sector with training, technical infrastructure and audience insight that will leave a lasting legacy in the digital economy in the north." He also described it as bringing together editorial and technology, "something we want to be second nature at our new base."

Fifty companies have now been selected to work with the Children's department and Future Media & Technology. The first commissions should be announced later this year.

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Jason Legget, Peel Media

Allied to this fresh commissioning approach is a massive recruitment campaign to fill the jobs of BBC staff who have decided not to move. The focus for this is a website, bbc.co.uk/jobs/north, which launched in February. Again, this is seen by the BBC as a way to change its relations with the sector. It envisages new kinds of career path in the sector, particularly in Future Media & Technology, with people swapping between the BBC and independent production companies, improving knowledge transfer in the process.

Restless natives

Both initiatives have come in for criticism from the existing digital sector in the North, however. Michael Gibson, MD of Lancaster agency Fat Media, raises a familiar concern about the roster process of big organisations – that after all the effort, time and cost involved in getting on the roster, you might not actually get any work from it (see page 6).

"We met Adrian Mills, the Children's commissioning editor, but got the same kind of thing from him as we did from other people at the BBC: that nothing's guaranteed," says Gibson. "So actually, maybe we're better off chasing a pot of gold we can reach, one that's maybe not at the end of a rainbow."

The other concern is that the BBC's need for staff will damage the sector by taking skilled people out of existing agencies. It's something that bothers Liane Grimshaw, managing partner at Amaze. "The one thing worrying me about the BBC coming to Manchester is how many of my staff will want to work for it," she says. "I went to an event which was supposed to be about the BBC's move and the first five minutes was about how it's recruiting for all these jobs."

Her view is backed up by Kirstie Buchanan, creative director at Reading Room Manchester. "It knows

it'll struggle to fill some positions, so where will it go fishing?" she asks.

These staffing concerns are played down by the BBC. Its spokesman points to the partnerships being developed with 50 universities and colleges across the North, as well as with sector training body Skillset. There's also the suggestion that the interest in jobs at the BBC will outstrip the number available, and the end result will be the Corporation nurturing the sector through training, flexible career paths and knowledge transfer.

Iain Bennett is digital and creative industry sector leader at the North West Development Agency, which was instrumental in securing the BBC move and is investing over £30m in MediaCityUK. He points out that human capital and skills is one of the areas being delivered by the public sector side of the project. "The BBC will get the skills it needs and be able to backfill jobs without eviscerating local business," he says.

The other two areas delivered by the public sector are the financial side – what Bennett describes as helping investors see what's there and getting transparency for business – and the technological support in the form of things like NorthernNet.

It's this technical aspect that Peel Media's Legget points to when he considers the shape of the development after the first phase is complete. He explains that the total project is phased over 15-20 years, but also admits its shape is being driven by the requirements of tenants as they sign up.

"The strategy is to pick digital partners, but the questions then are what else they bring and how that defines what MediaCityUK is. How do they change what's on site?"

"We've looked at the initial anchor tenants' requirements, which shaped phase one. Who knows how phase two will develop?" ■

▲ Development at MediaCityUK is planned to continue for 20 years, adapting as more tenants move in



KIRSTIE BUCHANAN
Creative director, Reading Room Manchester



DAVE CARTER
Head of Manchester Digital Development Agency



MICHAEL GIBSON
Managing director, Fat Media



LIANE GRIMSHAW
Managing partner, Amaze



BEN HATTON
Managing director, Rippleffect



STEVE SMITH
Founder, Software City

Talk of the town

To see what the digital sector in the North West is really like, we gathered the heads of leading agencies in the region to talk about their experiences of finding talent and winning clients. Moderated by nma editor-in-chief Michael Nutley. Photos by Lee Boswell

Michael Nutley, new media age: What challenges does being in the North West create?

Liane Grimshaw, Amaze: Some of the biggest problems in the North West are around recruitment and selection, in terms of the size of the talent pool. The competition between the local agencies for that talent pool is one of the key challenges, although I've noticed recently more people wanting to come here from London, knowing the industry is thriving and that there's a lot going on.

Another challenge is some clients in the North West think they should be getting something cheaper from agencies based here and have the perception that London is, and should be, more expensive. But the quality and value isn't any less just because you're based outside London.

Kirstie Buchanan, Reading Room: We don't use agencies at all to recruit staff so we have to use quite cunning ways, such as recruitment evenings. We also spend a lot of time at the universities, helped by our link with Manchester Digital. We mentor students in their first and final years and this year we have three students

who come in and work for us. Hopefully we'll create such a strong relationship that they'll want to work for us again afterward their degree.

Ben Hatton, Rippleffect: We've gone the other way in that we use agencies much more because we need quality staff quickly. We used to work with universities but got to a point where we needed so many quality people that even advertising in every magazine in the country we were struggling to find people.

Buchanan, Reading Room: Project managers are the ones I find really difficult to find. Developers we don't have a problem finding.

Hatton, Rippleffect: Getting quality people in Liverpool is difficult because there isn't an abundance of good agencies. There are plenty of small agencies, but finding someone who has sold or project managed at a certain level, when there are bigger agencies in Manchester, is hard. The staffing side will always be tough because education can't catch up. Our sector's evolving all the time, so as much as you try to work with universities, they're always behind.

Grimshaw, Amaze: We can fill from the bottom up but we struggle to find experienced senior people. Client services is one of the main areas where we struggle because good salespeople and account managers who really get digital are hard to find.

Michael Gibson, Fat Media: You'd imagine that in Lancaster we'd be struggling to get quality staff. Lancaster itself has two fabulous universities: the University of Lancaster is one of the highest rated in the North West and the University of Cumbria has turned out some incredible graphic designers. We work with both to find candidates and at the moment we're finding it really easy to bring those in. A lot of people do want to stay in the area.

Lancaster itself has built up a strong digital sector. BT acquired a couple of businesses and has about 250 staff who do BT Searchsmart, the search optimisation package for small clients. We're finding excellent candidates there. Then there are 40 or 50 small agencies, from one-man bands to 10-15 employees, where you always find people who aren't being fulfilled. We advertise all our posts online and don't use agencies.

Nutley, nma: Can academia deliver the kind of people the industry needs?

Buchanan, Reading Room: Maybe universities and agencies should spend more time together and form relationships, so agencies can help with courses. That would expose students to a working environment, because nine times out of ten they graduate and haven't a clue. We've had students who haven't gone back to university afterwards because their placement officers have said they've learnt more with us.

Steve Smith, Software City: Academia will never catch up with industry because it doesn't have the commercial imperatives. You get the theory and qualification at academia, then you get the real world experience from the placement. The universities are too concentrated on going after big companies and big schemes, their whole engine isn't really geared to dealing with lots of smaller relationships. But I think placements are part of the solution.

Grimshaw, Amaze: An agency is a very team-based environment, so being able to hold your own, be confident, communicate with people, stand up in front of a room, articulate yourself, these are really important skills that maybe students don't always learn. And irrespective of how the technology's moving, from a creative technical point of view there are some practical skills you need in an agency, as basic as how to put a presentation together, structure a proposal or cost something. These are the skills we end up teaching, because the people who come in are passionate about digital but know less of the business side.

Smith, Software City: That's a challenge for today's students. A degree might have been enough 10 or 20 years ago; now they need to have a couple of aptitudes alongside that, and be able to communicate and articulate that. So it's quite tough. They have to differentiate themselves as well as having a good degree under their belt.

Dave Carter, Manchester DDA: Some courses have begun to focus on project management. This helps students to think about how to organise themselves and be more adept when they come into the workplace. Some kind of project management is essential in so many aspects of this field.

Gibson, Fat Media: To be fair to the students, their naivety's not necessarily the problem, it's the naivety of the universities themselves. We're part of a group of about six agencies, between Preston and Lancaster, that are driving a

programme at the University of Central Lancashire to show students what they need, not just in terms of what they do for work experience but also the wider skills they need.

The other thing we're doing now, especially for things like project management, is looking at other industries. We recently hired a newspaper editor, someone really skilled with deadlines, time management and liaising with local people, and he's absolutely fantastic.

Smith, Software City: Have any of you been invited to university events to meet graduates? If the CEOs see some of these guys, they begin to get ideas and I think there isn't enough of that driven by the universities. The universities could do a lot more.

Grimshaw, Amaze: Sometimes when you don't have a vacancy, you come across someone who you just know is great and you create a job for them, because you know you're going to get some value out of it. That's the kind of thing that might happen with graduates if there was enough exposure to them.

Nutley, nma: Steve, what's your perspective on the North West sector?

Smith, Software City: One of the unexpected things is the lack of seed funding. There were some state-sponsored seed funds but they stopped at the end of 2008, and the long-awaited North West venture capital funds haven't materialised. So there has been a recession as well as a lack of follow-on money to invest in digital innovation, which has stopped a lot of the emerging technology market. But there haven't been any ▶

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Kirstie Buchanan, Reading Room



“A degree might have been enough 10 or 20 years ago; now graduates need to have a couple of aptitudes alongside that, and be able to communicate and articulate that”
Steve Smith, Software City

major casualties. People have been surviving, but not thriving, and have maintained the level of optimism.

Actually, it has been forcing them to do better stuff, to look at wider market opportunities, and more businesses are going a bit more national in their thinking and raising their ambition a bit. A downturn makes businesses leaner and tougher, the ones that survive.

Nutley, nma: My perception from outside the region is that there are two ways to think of your business: either you're a regional agency or you're a national agency that happens to be based outside London. There don't seem to be many of the latter in the North West. Is that fair?

Smith, Software City: It's getting better. Amaze has always been here because it had the Autonomy-based solutions that took it nationally and slightly internationally. But elsewhere there was a lack of ambition, Ben's company excepted. People were quite comfortable in the regional groove and I think they're now seeing well beyond that. If we can sell elsewhere, go for it.

Grimshaw, Amaze: The market has matured as well. Digital now has far greater importance in a client's business, more than just comms; it's

the business strategy, the technology underpinning it. Because of that growth, all the agencies that have been around in the North West for quite a long time have attracted clients nationally as well.

Buchanan, Reading Room: I think we have a longer heritage in some instances. Also there's the fact that even ten years ago you might be speaking to the ICT manager to do a web design job. Now you're speaking to the marketing director. That has made a vast difference.

Hatton, Rippleeffect: You can look at it two ways: you're a national agency on the basis of either your clients or your offices. With the first one it's fundamental to prove that you're a national agency and have national clients. The second is to service those clients and the needs of what you're trying to achieve. The big three companies that we're from have very much got national spread and big national clients as well.

Buchanan, Reading Room: But if our London office gets a pitch, we don't see that as a London pitch. We sit down and think about who the best people to work on that pitch are. We've brought in one of the project managers from Sydney for a pitch before because we knew his strength was in that particular subject. So where your office is located doesn't make a difference on certain pitches.

Gibson, Fat Media: The recession has created far more opportunities for us than it has problems. If you deliver a good service or product and you get results, then people will come to you. Some businesses that have worked with smaller agencies made the step up to an agency like ours. We get a lot of work in Cumbria, where there are few local agencies. But probably the biggest source for us has actually been a trickle-down from places like Manchester and Liverpool. We won a very large supermarket

group from Code in Manchester. We won Manchester Citizen's Advice and the Liverpool Advice Alliance, which is a collective of government agencies providing debt advice in Liverpool. So we've been able to grow at the expense of both larger agencies and much smaller ones too.

Nutley, nma: There's an assumption that digital agencies are naturally more collaborative than strategic agencies. Is that true?

Grimshaw, Amaze: That's core to what Amaze is about. There might be a lot of people in the agency but there are still so many different things we don't do as core. There are skillsets and services that I believe should be in-house, like search, and then there are specialist production areas – building a certain type of ad for a 3D environment, say. We'll never have that in-house so we need to work with smaller production companies.

I've heard stories of a digital agency coming in to support an above-the-line agency and taking the client. We were talking about this with AMV recently and they were saying they do creative strategy and then farm it out to production companies to create. For me that isn't collaboration, that's acting like a supplier. These are people with specialist knowledge and you need to involve them in the creative and strategic thinking.

Buchanan, Reading Room: I think the BBC's @North commissioning initiative will be interesting because you have digital agencies, production companies, CGI people and all of that. There are already workshops and a couple of Ning groups where people can join forces.

Grimshaw, Amaze: The BBC is pretty much demanding everyone has to collaborate for @North.

Gibson, Fat Media: We were going to go through the process. We have the skills, we do a lot of work in children's and @North was probably right up our street. But we pulled out. We realised that after the effort of getting on the list, while it'd be fantastic PR being on the BBC's roster, you'd then have to go through another collaborative process to be one of maybe four agencies from that 40 or 80, and even then you might not even get the work.

Grimshaw, Amaze: It's a longer-term view for the BBC and its relationships. That's the way we've looked at @North, not just the pot of gold at the end of it.

Gibson, Fat Media: Maybe we're better off chasing a pot of gold we can reach, one that's maybe not at the end of a rainbow. ■

The perfect fit

Not being in London doesn't mean that an agency offers any less creative or effective work. The North West offers plenty of talent and there are several advantages to client and agency being close by, finds Maeve Hosea

In a pitch two years ago, Manchester agency Code Computerlove gave printer manufacturer Brother some good business advice about what assets it had and what it wanted to achieve. This business acumen mixed with the agency's strong design heritage was the winning ticket for Code, which has serviced Brother since. There may be a greater concentration of top-class agencies in London, but that doesn't mean they're the only way to obtain superior quality work.

The same quality and specialism exists outside the capital. This is frequently translating into North West agencies being hired by clients based in Manchester, like Brother.

"I think good marketing is often about the nuances of things," says Dave Peters, Brother UK head of business development. It's advantageous,

then, to have human contact in that marketing function and for the printer brand to work with local partners in areas of its crucial digital marketing strategy. "We try to use a local agency if it can give us the quality," he says. "Code offered us top-class specialisation. Just being locally situated wouldn't have cut it for me if it was second division. However, I can be at Code's office in ten minutes. If I have an issue it's generally about my interpretation of a particular problem, so it really helps to communicate that face to face."

Digital marketing specialist Reading Room opened its Manchester office six years ago with a portfolio of full-service digital communications. Local clients include the Youth Hostel Association, which wanted to change its online communications radically to compete in today's travel sector, and Auto Trader, which is launching a completely digital marketing project.

The agency's work for another local client, environmental charity ▶

▼ Manchester agency Love convinced boot brand Dr Martens of its abilities with a design-a-shoe campaign to create a sense of ownership among its target audience



► Revolution works with Rippleffect in Liverpool as it feels talent thrives better outside London



Groundwork UK, demonstrates its skills at generating creative ideas to solve clients' problems. "When we invited pitches, we did it on a national level and there were other agencies from the North West, with just a few that really stood out," says Jon Kedwards, communications and policy manager at Groundwork UK. He was impressed by the way Reading Room didn't blind him with technical jargon but put ideas first and foremost, with technical aspects as a way of supporting them.

The charity's primary objectives were to sell its services more effectively through digital channels and ensure visitors to its site felt excited, informed, inspired and encouraged. "A lot of agencies have a standard approach they tweak for different organisations, but we were impressed that Reading Room had taken so much time to take our needs into account," says Kedwards.

Alastair Thornton, head of digital marketing at Auto Trader, echoes these opinions when discussing the work he did with Reading Room's recently launched associate agency The Distillery. "It's willing to be collaborative and added a lot of value in terms of enthusiasm for the pitch," he says. "It helps to have that collaborative approach if an agency is based nearby, and it ties in with the general flexibility of approach that Reading Room has."

Ade Allenby, online marketing manager at Warrington-based Opal Telecom, suggests there could be cultural affinity in hiring a local agency. "You get more of a common understanding and method of communication," he says. "Whether that extends to business or not isn't clear and it doesn't dictate my choice, but I suspect for some people it does."

Opal's first work with Manchester-based Amaze centred on creating a search-friendly website with web analytics to support it. This has given Opal a deeper understanding of its customers, which it's building on with a series of web campaigns.

The personal facet to business relationships that's achievable from a close geographical proximity is still a valuable quality for Allenby. "All our agencies come from Manchester and Leeds – that kind of tells a story," he says. "That personal aspect gets the best understanding from a brief and therefore the best results."

Manchester Metropolitan University is working with design

"Agencies coming from the lively and highly collaborative digital sector culture in the North West have been able to land work with big brands that have no particular local connection"

Shaun Fensom, Manchester Digital

agency Corporation Pop on the university's virtual worlds strategy. It's using Second Life to explore how technology can be effectively incorporated into the curriculum to offer students a more experiential and richer learning environment.

Corporation Pop has maintained development through digital technologies and personal visits to the MMU campus, enabling client and agency to share information and workshop ideas in a creative and supportive environment. "Interaction is always better in person," says Paul Booth, a senior lecturer in the Film Department of Media, responsible for the project. "However, the choice of agency wasn't made for geographical reasons but from recommendations and the strength of the developments it had made in Second Life."

Agencies based outside London will sometimes be viewed as 'local' but they can offer big brands a number of advantages. "They're often competitive on price; they're in touch with themes and trends that

Case study: First TransPennine Express

David Crocker, marketing manager

We started working with Code Computerlove around three years ago when we decided our website, which had been built by a London agency and wasn't providing us with what we needed, had to be replaced.

Code fully understood that we were looking for a ruthlessly commercial site that stood apart from the derivative rail company sites. We were likeminded in our view of



what the site should be: something that invites customer engagement rather than yet another opportunity to plug the corporate logo. We had our own targets for the site but they were a little hazy. Code was insistent on our developing clear, quantified targets against which it could be judged.

Our working relationship ran through two stages. In the short term we needed Code to salvage what it could from the existing site, optimising its performance and capability to overcome its failings, while we worked closely together to build the new one.

The resultant site exceeded expectations. It's an organic product, developing and improving all the time, and we're enjoying record levels of visits and tickets sales. Despite being clearly focused on driving customers towards ticket purchase, the lengthening average dwell time shows we're keeping customers on the site for longer.

For us the crucial factor of who we work with is built around a meeting of minds and working closely together to achieve some very tight targets, and enjoying doing so.

inwardly focused London agencies may miss; and they offer national brands that are headquartered outside London a focused and attentive service," says Shaun Fensom, chair of new media trade association Manchester Digital. "Agencies coming from the lively and highly collaborative digital sector culture in the North West have been able to land work with big brands that have no particular local connection, as well as some well-known names that are based here."

Bar chain Revolution has a strong customer service ethic and prides itself on aspects such as its 15-minute promise on delivery of food orders. So it wanted its digital proposition to reflect these brand values. Initially, a web project executed by Liverpool agency Rippleffect was about driving web traffic and collecting data. Now it focuses on providing an extension to the quality customer service of the bar environment. Staff at the agency are regulars at the bars and understand the brand's culture.

Andy Windsor, head of online at Inventive Leisure, owner of Revolution, enjoys working with what he describes as the "stand-out" agencies in the North West, believing good universities and an inherently creative region nourish them. "There are many digital agencies in London, so in a base like the North West, it's the good agencies that tend to secure the talent," he says. "The region is full of creative talent and Rippleffect is just one of the service providers we use based in the area."

In London, Phil Borthwick, marketing director of Dr Martens, came across Manchester agency Love in 2004 when he worked for an agency running an account for Sony PlayStation. "It felt humbling to find our provincial cousins producing work that was wiping the floor with us," he says. Now he employs the Manchester-based agency because of its creative credentials and ability to execute a simple idea powerfully. "It understands design very well and it's rare to find this running all the way through an agency," Borthwick says.

"All our agencies come from Manchester and Leeds – that kind of tells a story. That personal aspect gets the best understanding from a brief and therefore the best results"

Ade Allenby, Opal Telecom



"It's something I used to struggle with when I was on the agency side."

Love's winning pitch for Dr Martens was answering a brief to connect with an audience of young consumers with whom the 50-year-old brand felt it had lost touch. Other agencies wanted to do a heritage story but Love took a different approach, encouraging the brand to hand over designing of the iconic shoe to consumers. The target audience responded enthusiastically to the digital campaign and Dr Martens received 12,000 designs.

"Because of the way Love designed the project, you didn't have to be a graphic designer to make it work," says Borthwick. "It tapped into what consumers wanted, was well executed and seeded in the right environment."

Another London-based brand with a North West agency on its books is the Tate Gallery. Sharna Jackson, Tate

Kids editor, responsible for all child-related digital activity at the brand, has been impressed by the work of MagneticNorth. The agency first worked with Tate on a games project called Discovering Turner, launched in conjunction with the gallery's major Turner exhibition in 2009.

The design processes the agency used impressed Jackson. She judges its strengths to be similar to first-rate agencies across the board. Her enthusiasm is also influenced by the extra effort the design team at MagneticNorth put into the project, including visiting several of the gallery's exhibitions.

"We were impressed by the fun functionality of its website, how it invites you to interact with it," says Jackson. "It's like London agencies but, coming from Manchester, is potentially less jaded and brings fresh eyes to a project." ■



▲ Printer brand Brother has found working with fellow Manchester-based Code Computerlove eased by their proximity

▲ Tate Gallery first worked with MagneticNorth in Manchester on a tie-in on its Kids site for a major Turner exhibition