

# Power of Information: New taskforce

Speech by Tom Watson MP

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We commissioned Ed Mayo and Tom Steinberg to write the Power of Information report because we knew that information, presented in the right way, was a potent driver for improving public services and government.

We also knew that there were new forms of community out there which government wasn't currently able to talk to.

Tom and Ed did not let any of us down. Their report was comprehensive. Radical. Full of ideas. I'd like to thank them for their important contribution to the future. Public Sector Information and the need to engage new information communities were the original reasons we commissioned Power of Information.

Today I am going to offer two arguments that I think compliment the Prime Minister's recent announcement on public service reform.

Firstly, that freeing up data will allow us to unlock the talent British entrepreneurs. And secondly, engaging people – using the simple tools that bring them together – will allow the talents of all our people to be applied to the provision of public services.

Free up data, liberate talent and catalyse creativity. Engage bring people together using simple tools and you empower. Let me tell you that I view the Power of Information agenda as the single most important policy area I have to deliver on in my role as Cabinet Office Minister.

It took me a bit of time to reach this conclusion. Understanding the implications of the report is a bit like asking the question, what is the Matrix? such is the profundity of the contents. But as a former trainee assistant librarian, how we collate, store, process, understand and use data is something that I've had an unnecessary fascination for many years.

And the Power of Information contributes an answer to a wider question about how government can develop the framework to manage our collective intellectual capital in the modern age.

This is not a new problem. But the scale has never been so vast.

We've actually been contending with ways to manage our collective intellectual capital for thousands of years. Whether it be the Sumerian merchants of 5000 BC recording trading information on clay tablets or the museums of the great Imperial hierarchies of China and Egypt, or the Great Library of Alexandria which legend claims was started with Aristotle's own collection papyrus scripts.

The difference of course is that today we contend with what Richard Saul Wurman describes as a 'tsunami of data'.

Human beings produce five exabytes of recorded information every year. That's more than 40,000 times the number of words stored in the British library, more than the number of words ever spoken by human beings. And Kryder's law, that almost mystical formula that says that digital data capacity will double every 13 months – means that we can now super-process acres of data that was undigestible only a decade or so ago.

The Great Library of Alexandria of 300BC was the first with the comprehensive ambition to collect all the world's knowledge together under one roof. It was probably also the first to be open to the public, because even then, they knew that successful knowledge transfer was the key to innovation. As far as I know, they didn't charge for entry.

That's not far off from Google's mission today – to organise all the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

OK, the Great Library of Alexandria didn't also have the mission to generate a staggeringly large sum of money from targeted advertising but you get my point. And cheaper computing has created an industry in new thinking on information technology. Charles Leadbeater in his recent book *We-think* makes the point that 'thanks to rising educational attainment, spreading communications and cheaper technology, innovation and creativity are becoming increasingly distributed'.

My job is to make sure that government can benefit from this new thinking too. When we were first elected in 1997 people had a recipient relationship with data, they got what they were given when they were given it. It was static. One way.

And when Tom was first asked to draft the Power of Information report, back in January 2007 the term Web 2.0 had only been around for just over a year. Pervasive, high-speed, easy-to-use internet access has transformed this. Today, the most successful websites are those that bring together content created by the people who use them.

In scale, the spread of social media is comparable to the spread of telephones in the 1930's to the 1950's. Yet it's happened in two years not 20.

Five years ago, I set up political blog. At the time, it was seen as a radical act.

People couldn't believe that I had opened myself up to such scrutiny and occasional daily abuse.

But the blog broke down the walls between legislators and electors in a way that interested me. So I persevered.

Today I'm no longer a pioneer. There are thousands of political bloggers. And politicians can no longer set to default broadcast mode. They have to engage.

Some have said that the Power of Information agenda is a geek manifesto. It's not. It's about making people's lives and their communities better. As Clay Shirky would say, we've reached a point where technology is simple and boring enough to be socially useful and interesting.

Any community organiser or activist knows just how hard it is to get people together to do something. Weeks of backbreaking work required to organise a campaign. My earliest childhood memories are of endless hours of turning the handle of a manual duplicating machine whilst my dad fermented revolution in the pub.

Social media has removed the requirement for my son to turn the handle for his dad. It allows people to organise a demonstration or a lobby at a single click, with global effect. This is profoundly democratising.

And profoundly challenging for politicians. It also means my son can spend more time on the CBeebies website leaving his dad computerless.

And it's not just cheaper or easier for organisers. The personal cost in time and effort has diminished to a mouse click. With unsurprising results, more people take part. The maths is pretty simple.

Over 7 million electronic signatures have been sent, electronically, to the Downing Street petition website. 1 in 10 citizens have emailed the Prime Minister about an issue. The next stage is to enable e-petitioners to connect with each other around particular issues and to link up with policy debates both on and off Government webspace.

The challenge is for elected representatives to follow their customers and electors into this brave new world. Some of us have already taken that leap. As well as blogs, there are many more MPs using Facebook and Yahoo Groups to communicate their ideas and listen to other.

Only last week, the Prime Minister became the first head of Government in Europe to launch his own channel on Twitter, which I can tell you from experience, is extremely useful to his ministers at least.

But we need to make it easier for others too.

Hazel Blears will be leading this agenda when her department will address this in a White Paper on engagement in the summer.

But I want to take the Power of Information agenda further and do it faster. So today I am announcing the establishment of the Power of Information Taskforce. I'm pleased to say that Richard Allan has agreed to Chair the Taskforce. Richard has a vast breadth of knowledge in this field. He's also an all round good guy and I know he will help us provide clarity to government departments as they contend with the power of information agenda.

Richard is here tonight and I hope that after the formal proceedings you might like to share some of your own ideas with him. Richard is also joined by a number of other

taskforce members. They're all people with remarkable track records in this field. We're lucky. The UK has some of the world's leading talent.

I've brought this taskforce together because we're about making a difference for people. Some have said that the Power of Information is just for geeks. It isn't. The report does not mention technology once. It's about using information to make people's lives better.

Some of the taskforce agenda will be about building initiatives that the government has already undertaken:

We first facilitated data mash up with Downing Street says in 2004.

We have a prototype data lab running out for the Department for Transport.

And today the PM announced an initiative that would allow you to find your community Bobbies using your postcode.

And in the week where the digital world went crazy over Mystarbucksidea.com (I've already voted for free Wifi), NHS choices launched a blog about diabetes, bringing together the people who treat the illness and the people who receive treatment. It's a brilliant ideas and hopefully will foster a new information community who can work together to improve things.

The taskforce will bring its expertise to bare on existing initiatives to see if we can what we already do better.

And there are some pressing issues that I want the committee to look at urgently.

My officials have been working up draft guidance on how public servants can use social media. And the Power of Information Report made a series of recommendations about this too.

I want the taskforce to ensure that the COI and Cabinet Office produce a set of guidelines that adheres to the letter of the law when it comes to the civil service code but also lives within the spirit of the age. I'll be putting some very draft proposals to the taskforce to consider later this week.

We will also look at, and learn from, the way people are communicating with each other.

The 19th century co-operative movements had their roots in people pooling resources to make, buy or distribute physical goods. Modern online communities are the new co-operatives.

Mrs Watson is a regular user of Netmums. It's a great site. Parents chat, and offer, I've been there, advice on everything from baby whispering to school admissions. Except it's not just a handful of mums and dads, it's thousands of them, available in your living room, 24 hours a day.

Sounds like hell well, it's a lifeline when your baby's screaming at four in the morning, you have no idea why and you just need to know you're not alone. But my point is, imagine if quarter of a million mums decided to meet at Wembley Stadium to discuss the best way to bring up their kids. Midwives would be there dispensing advice. Health visitors, nursery teachers, welfare rights advisers would be there. Even politicians would try and get in on the act. But when twice this number chooses to meet together in the same place online, we just ignore them. That's going to have to change.

By bringing people onto the taskforce with the skills and experiences of people like Sally Russell we can move further and faster in this area.

We also need to look at the way Government talks to itself. Whitehall is arguably Britain's most important knowledge factory, but we're using out of date tools.

Now I'm at the heart of the system, I can see policymaking is a stylised, traditional process.

Take a motor industry analogy, in some ways the policy process is a bit like building a Morgan in Malvern: a handful of people taking years to create beautiful, hand-crafted model.

But surely the future is to be more like a Toyota made in Derby, modern tools, modern processes, high-speed development and delivery.

To do this within the system I would like to see more use of techniques commonplace now in the wider world, internal blogs, wikis, discussion forums, shared workspaces, all still quite rare within the machine.

Two weeks ago the Prime Minister signalled that we were moving public services to the next stage of reform. He said that we were not only going to, further enhance choice but also empower both the users of services and all the professionals who deliver them – to drive up standards for all.

Underpinning these reforms will be the power of information.

In his recent speech to the Guardian's Public Services Summit my colleague Ed Miliband said that the starting point for public services must be the kind of society we want to see and how we think about equality.

For Ed, Modern equality comes from the opportunity to choose the life you want to lead based on the equal moral worth of every citizen and the right to express choice based on their own talent and capabilities. Ed argues that modern public services must be responsive to rising expectations, collaborative, flexible and accountable. In essence he wants user centric government.

And why do we want this? It's all about innovation.

Transformational government is about wrapping services around the citizen, not citizens around the services. Government is already doing this but again, the power of

information agenda can help it to do better. I want us to work with the public servants who are pioneering this agenda.

Let me give you an example of this by naming a public servant that I think should have his desk moved into Number 10. Peter Jordan works at DirectGov.

His job is to assess how people find the DirectGov site, what pages they look at and what they do when they get there. Last month DirectGov had over 7 million visitors. Peter is seeing the aggregate desires of millions of UK public service using citizens. I had half an hour with him a fortnight ago and came away with a dozen ideas as to how we can improve our public services.

Customer and search insight are central to how we can answer the, responsive, and, flexible, part of Ed Miliband's vision for public services. It will help us develop William Heath's WIBBI approach, Wouldn't It Be Better If – is a clarion cry for constant innovation.

And when we know we get a delivery channel right we should use the 'collaboration' part of Ed's vision to best effect, to gain, social leverage, as Professor Shirky would say.

Let me use a recent story to illustrate this point. I recently registered my local Labour Party with groupsnearyou.com. This is a new site provided by the MySociety people. It's a site for people who run small scale community focused groups.

Through the site, I found West Bromwich Freecycle.

I'm the Member of Parliament for West Bromwich East and I didn't know about an important recycling initiative going on in my own patch. This information now means that a bag load of clothing for a small child and a habitat sofa are about given a second chance to give pleasure.

A simple, free tool enabled a small social good. Do this on at scale and you have a very good thing going on. Nine million people now pay their car tax online. Wouldn't it be great if when they have finished their transaction they can be directed to a kind of golden page that lets them find small local community groups in their area or offers them a menu of things to do that are good.

Recycling one sofa is one thing. Recycling nine million sofas is a big contribution to sustainable communities. The taskforce are going to pick up on this stuff.

Before I conclude I want to talk a bit about data mashing and its implications for Government.

The Government creates vast quantities of information. I'm not sure the calculation has ever been done, but I think it's a safe bet that we're the biggest producer of original information in the country.

And much of that information has the potential to be reused in data mashups. Some of it already is, like Hansard on theyworkforyou, or Google Maps using Ordnance Survey data.

Some of the most useful information is charged for, to recover the cost of producing it. This 'trading funds' business model is in many ways very sensible. But predates the capability to mash-up at low to zero cost. This new capability has fundamentally changed, for ever, the nature of the markets for information. In some ways analogous to changes in other digital goods markets, music and film.

As the economists would say, there is no free lunch here; someone has to pay for the cost of producing the data. But there has been a lively debate about whether the overall benefits to the economy and society are better served by giving the data away at marginal cost. Some argue that this is a major impediment to innovation in the services sector at large.

The Power of Information Report recognised that, and made recommendations to the Treasury. The Treasury, with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, published an independent economic study in the Budget and announced its intention to look at these issues during this spending review cycle.

This is good news. I've asked the taskforce to work with BERR and the Treasury to help build the arguments.

Again, this is not a unique problem for human kind to deal with. How we access data has been with us for centuries.

The Cairo 'House of Wisdom' of 1000AD deployed some of the open source principles we discuss today. As James Westfield Thompson notes in his book on the mediaeval library 'Whoever wanted was at liberty to copy any book he wished to copy, or whoever required to read a certain book' could do so. Admittance was permitted to everyone, 'without distinction of rank'.

It was this early open source approach that arguably fostered 500 years of Islamic scholarship in important fields like medicine, astronomy, lexicography, literature and science.

In contrast, European data was stored in monasteries and did not foster easy knowledge transfer. As Gibbon wrote in the 'Decline and fall of the Roman empire' the 'age of Arabian learning continued about five hundred years' and was coeval with the darkest and most slothful period of European annals?

I recently gave a speech where I nailed my colours to the mast on some of this stuff. I said that:

I believe in the power of mass collaboration.

I believe that as James Surowiecki says the many are smarter than the few.

I believe that the old hierarchies in which government policy is made are going to change for ever.

I said that I don't believe the post-bureaucratic age argument. It's just old thinking, laissez faire ideas with a new badge.

The future of government is to provide tools for empowerment, not to sit back and hope that laissez-faire adhococracy will suffice.

A post bureaucratic age misunderstands the idea of an enabling state one that moderates collaborative activity for a shared social good. The collaborative state still requires leaders and enablers, doers and thinkers. It still requires public services but services with boundaries porous to external ideas.

I said that ideologies that fail to comprehend the power of sharing, where activity is motivated by non-market production or where, as Stephen Weber says the traditional notions of property rights are inverted – are doomed to extinction.

And I talked about the three rules of open source: One, nobody owns it. Two, everybody uses it. And three, anyone can improve it.

Two days later a political opponent sent out an email laying claim that in fact they are the 'owners' of these new ideas. I was accused of plundering policies from the Conservatives.

The irony that laying claim to the ownership of a policy on open source was lost to the poor researcher who had spent a day dissecting the speech. He'd been able to do so easily because it was freely available on my blog, a simple tool used for communicating information quickly and at nearly zero cost without the requirement to charge for access.

The point is, who cares? It doesn't matter who has the ideas. It's what you do with them and how you improve on them that counts.

That being said, if there is anyone who deserves the credit for original political thinking in this area it is a Labour Party member.

Fabian and Labour Party member HG Wells in 1937 penned an article entitled 'The world brain: the idea of a permanent world encyclopaedia'. Wells predicted that the 'whole human memory can be, and probably in a short time will be, made accessible to every individual' forming a world brain that would create a 'widespread world intelligence, conscious of itself'. Charles Leadbeater restates the case that ideas live within communities as much as they do in the heads of individuals. And when those ideas are shared, great things can happen. Lean's Engine Reporter, massively improved innovation in the mining industry because engineers could share new ways of working. Sydney Brenner's 'Worm Breeder's Gazette' fostered a transglobal scientific collaboration to crack the genome sequence of the *C.elegans* worm.

The power of information taskforce will work to support the endeavours of collaborative communities in the UK and beyond.

New tools and ways of working are going to allow us to apply our collective intellectual capital to the seemingly impossible challenges of the modern age. I look forward to collaborating with them and you on this exciting agenda.

Thank you.