

## **A Different Kind of Digital?**

### **Response to Digital Britain Interim Report**

March 12, 2009

*Revised version*

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## Introduction

Government consultation programmes rarely result in citizens and interested parties heaping praise on policy makers, but in the case of the Digital Britain Interim Report, it is striking how the notion of a consultation process for a centrally-generated policy document seems to press all the wrong buttons for those whose experience and knowledge might have most to offer policy makers during the consultation - those embedded in the communities and disciplines who already using digital technology heavily. Decentralisation, self-organisation and mass collaboration are the order of the day in this world; centrally-generated anything is largely distrusted (if not quite anathema).

That said, the mismatch in expectations of the process is itself no mere process point: it is emblematic of other more fundamental differences in opinion between the interim report's authors and many of those who would describe themselves as "digital experts".

*In particular, the report's authors seem to see "digital" as if it were a turbo-charging technology for existing telecommunication and media industries - a better engine for the business of tubes and content transmission; we on the other hand see "digital" as a different kind of technology altogether (one which connects people to each other) which has the potential to fundamentally change our worlds in lots of (largely unanticipated) ways.*

This difference in opinion perhaps explains why much of the report concerns itself with infrastructure for the existing telecommunications and media industries: indeed, many of the comments already submitted in the consultation process are about these 'digital' infrastructure issues.

By contrast much of what follows is devoted to the other - more human - side of 'digital' about which the report is curiously silent: specifically, observations & suggestions<sup>1</sup> about what policy makers should consider if they want to build what we - the new content

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<sup>1</sup> In truth, many of these came from conversations and interactions with a range of practitioners and experts, specifically around Amp09 & the IPA Social Media Group (though in no way should it be assumed that this reflects or represents the views of participants). For more detail on the Amp09 conversations, see "A Digital Britain report or a Digital Infrastructure report?" (submitted by Jamie Coomber & Amanda Gore).

creators and technologists - imagine a truly 'digital' Britain to be: one in which *connective* technology is embedded and harnessed by UK citizens in all aspects of their lives; one which uses these as tools of mass-collaboration and at the same time individual self-determination.

## 1. What is 'digital'?

Marshall McLuhan famously observed that we try to understand new technologies through the lens of that which they end up replacing: for example, most media folk initially saw television as radio with pictures - stilted presenters in evening dress being the rather dull result.

This thought seems to capture the problem at the heart of Interim Report on Digital Britain: fundamentally, its authors seem to assume that 'digital' is a set of technologies that turbo-charge existing content distribution systems. 'Digital' under this model is simply the latest means to encode sounds, visuals, text and other data files and transmit them across time and space to an audience much like that currently receives such content: 'digital' as the Viagra of content distribution - faster, better etc. This conception of digital perhaps explains the report's obsession with tubes and wiring and also the involvement of the content creators and distributors in both early stage consultation and most graphically, the panel at the NESTA Q&A with Lord Carter (which consisted of a tube owner and content consultant).

To some extent this is useful as it allows policy makers to consider the big infrastructure issues in isolation - issues such as:

- How much bandwidth is really going to provide Britain with the technology platform to make it a world-leader in the use of these technologies?
- Is 2 Megabits really enough even to function? Will it be so in 2019? What is needed to match our neighbours and competitors? What about quality and reliability? How can we ensure that these are both optimised as we accumulate more and more devices in our homes and workplaces are internet-dependent (from fridges upwards)?
- How can we ensure that reach is maximised? How can we build "the final mile" and who should be responsible for this? Should it be a government or private sector responsibility?
- Is fibre going to remain the correct technology solution in another decade? What else should we consider?

Much of the response already submitted in the consultation process dwells on these kinds of *broadband infrastructure* questions so there is little point in repeating the arguments again here but there is clearly a great opportunity to underestimate what

is needed, to lower expectations of geographical reach and so - *all of which should be resisted.*

## **2. Digital = Connectivity = Disruption**

There is another side to 'digital', which the report scarcely acknowledges: a side that sees digital technology not as an upgrade to current content distribution models but as something entirely different. That is, *'digital' as a means to connect people to each other in new and more valuable (to them) ways.*

In his classic "Future of Competition", the business guru CK Prahalad tells the story of a pacemaker manufacturer to illustrate how the person-to-person connectivity that the Internet delivers can fundamentally disrupt the status quo, can change existing market structures and redefine existing relationships. For years, the highly technical manufacturer would market their services only to the "decision-maker" - the medical professional - but with the advent of the Internet, this cosy relationship was disrupted. As any GP will tell you, patients now have - courtesy of the internet - access to information from other patients and patient groups, manufacturers and experts; they arrive in the GP surgery wanting their say in the choice of treatment (even down to specified brand names of treatments). Much as they complain, the medical expert is no longer in charge. Of course, in many ways, public service provision has found itself pandering to this in its choice-agenda for education and health & through the provision of large amounts of information to facilitate that choice (though in many ways this transparency was non-negotiable).

The point being is that with peer-to-peer connection comes disruptive change to the status quo with outcomes that no-one can anticipate confidently. Thinking about broadband technology as a means to turbo-charge (or indeed, merely protect) the businesses of today's content creation and distribution industry is short-sighted if not actually self-deluding: broadband technology will create fundamental disruptions in the industries the report sees as the co-creators of "Digital Britain".

In fact, in many ways these changes are already impacting heavily on the status quo: the music industry in particular currently sees much of its current economic model being swept away by peer-to-peer file sharing (although it continues to imagine that waves can be resisted and "piracy" can be stamped out) and young music fans are learning to expect music to be free; ringtones, experiences and concerts are now what you pay for (although this will no doubt change again). Other industries whose economic

models are based on ideas of man-made scarcity and copyright ownership are likely to go the same way in the immediate future. This is a big issue, but more in the sense that such changes cannot be resisted indefinitely: new business models and ways of earning money need to be developed. Clearly, government can play a supportive role to this end, in various ways, but it is up to the private sector to do the heavy lifting here.

But government itself needs to rethink its notion of “Digital Britain” in the context of digital government and public service provision: seeing ‘digital’ as a means to reduce the cost of digital government is also missing the point. The likelihood is that it will serve to redefine the relationship between government, citizen (and citizen) in other ways (many of which will not be cheaper but require more personalised and more responsive service delivery).

**Fundamentally, digital technology is not about faster or cleverer ways to distribute the same kind of content to a passive audience; it is about connecting 60M Britains to each other and to others like them in the rest of the world** so that they can interact with each other, do stuff together, share information and experiences and learn from each other.

A Britain of digitally-connected people is the fertile soil to replace the financial sector in the UK economy - for innovation and the creation of new content experiences and services, of the new business models - as the Interim Report describes. Of course, it is hard to know from this perspective what to do for the best (Google still doesn't know how to make money out of Facebook) but it would help to be clear about what ‘digital’ means and what it brings and set the course for policy accordingly.

### **3. People are the main challenge**

In the 1989 Kevin Costner movie, “Field of Dreams”, the old adage of “if we build it, they will come” resurfaces. Those of us who work in the digital space already are all too familiar with the hubris that tends to be associated with this attitude, particularly where technology is concerned. Making the right policy decisions about plumbing is one part of the question (and tough enough on its own) but the real challenges to the Digital Britain team are *human-shaped*. This is not a once-and-for-ever transition project from one invisible engine to another (such as the switch over from analogue to digital TV); rather, the ask is much greater:

*How do we build adoption and use of the connective technologies among the British people so widespread that the Digital Britain platform will be worth having?*

*How do we build a nation whose use of digital technology to enhance their lives is second to none, whose appetite for the same is such that it provides fertile and attractive ground for a succession of experiments and innovations by businesses large and small?*

*How do we create a country that is in its everyday life and business practices a pre-eminent world leader in the use of ‘digital’ technology?*

This challenge will not be met by the usual policy touchstones of education and schools - by “equipping” (!) us for digital technology. There are already far too many policy initiatives looking to the curriculum for solutions. Indeed, as Douglas Adams might have suggested<sup>2</sup>, the real issue lies with the older demographics - how can we encourage those who are not ‘digital natives’ to adopt and use connective technology to its full potential for their lives? Quite rightly, many 50 somethings are resisting - most find Facebook a trifle puerile for their tastes. The point being of course not which of

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Salmon of Doubt*, Adams suggests there are 3 kinds of technology: the kind of stuff which appears between our birth and teens (not technology, just ‘stuff’); that which appears in our teens and twenties (what we normally mean when we say ‘technology’) and finally that which appears once our twenties are long gone (which we normally refer to as ‘unnatural’ or some such).

today's applications are adopted but that the type of technology should be.

Equally, it is clear that mere infrastructure investment may well not be enough on its own. The history of mass technology introductions highlights how notoriously unpredictable we humans can be in terms of what we adopt and what we don't: SMS was not originally intended as a mass tool for mobile telephony but when discovered adoption was driven largely by peer influence and imitation, much to the industry's surprise; by contrast, the mobile internet has until recently been studiously resisted by British users.

In the face of these difficulties, it may seem tempting to leave this human adoption issue to a later date - nearer to the national availability of broadband, perhaps? **This will probably be the wrong decision** as it is only by having a large population already exploiting today's technology base that we can hope to encourage businesses and innovators to develop the next wave of applications, devices and new business models that will make the broadband-enabled Digital Britain a worthwhile reality.

**What is needed is a decade-long programme to encourage adoption and use of lower-tech digital technologies:**

Models of behavioural change are emerging which can help address this kind of challenge more successfully than has historically been the case: policy makers need to study these carefully and embrace the learning in shaping such a programme.

For example, it seems much more likely that if we establish the kind of peer-to-peer behaviours that characterise the digital age at the lower end of technological evolution, that we will get the more advanced (and frankly not yet invented) devices, services and businesses adopted, as and when they become available. The traditional approach would perhaps hope to make one giant technological leap, *from a standing start*.

Equally, in policy and communication, we tend to assume that it is what *we do* to individual citizens that is the key lever to shape their behaviour when it is becoming increasingly clear to many that it is what they - individual citizens - do in response to each other that

shapes their behaviour<sup>3</sup>. We need to learn how to harness social influence to shape the adoption of this new social technology.

So, let's start - not with tomorrow's teenagers - but with my seventy-seven year old, wheelchair-bound mother and how she learned to stay in daily touch with her children through something as banal as...SMS. And how this improves her life immeasurably. How can we encourage this kind of thing among her peers and then on throughout the population?

*Government has a clear role to play* in leading, shaping and funding this programme, albeit with the collaboration and participation of the private sector, all of those already working with such technologies. And (as suggested) the population as whole.

**Without such a programme to encourage adoption, “Digital Britain” runs the risk of just meaning faster downloads and more Super-HD** which would be an expensive waste of infrastructure investment and - more importantly - a missed opportunity for our citizens, our industries and the country as a whole.

Mark Earls' latest book *“Herd - how to change mass behaviour by harnessing our true nature”* (Wiley) is out now. The paperback is available from July.

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<sup>3</sup> The social or “HERD” model of behaviour change.