

Comments “Digital Britain”

I broadly welcome the proposals contained in “Digital Britain: The Interim Report”. I have some comments, listed under the main headings below.

Digital networks

I agree that mobile wireless has a significant role to play in Digital Britain, and welcome action to release spectrum. However, I would want to see that competitiveness is maintained in the sector.

Though recent developments have been encouraging, the market in mobile broadband is confusing for consumers. In Further and higher education, learners are put off from mobile data by costs. If mobile operators are to make a contribution to the universal service commitment, we would like to see transparent pricing.

The high cost of data roaming in the EU is a barrier to adopting mobile devices for rich content distribution. Operators have the right to make profits, I note that the operators themselves are international, not national, businesses, and it is commonplace for British citizens to “roam” in Europe for work, or recreation.

Digital content

I welcome opportunities for providing further support to foster UK creative ambition. I work at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication. Some of Ravensbourne College’s former students are involved in entrepreneurial activity in new media. Last.FM was developed by post-graduate students at Ravensbourne, and, in its early days, hosted at, and supported by, the College.

I do not consider that there is a “clear and unambiguous” distinction between legal and illegal sharing of content. I agree that “criminal scale” copying poses a threat to creative professions, though would argue that business models that attempt to “deglobalise” distribution unwittingly encourage this practice. I recognise that appropriation or creative reuse of content is an important font of cultural development. I can see that there is a distinction between fannish homage and blatant plagiarism. I also note that, in the general discourse of IPR, the terms “creator” and “rights-holder” are often conflated. These two parties are frequently distinct entities, whose interests are not aligned, particularly where creators are at the start of their careers. Whilst a healthy knowledge economy has a role for all parties – creators, exploiter/distributor/holder, and consumer – I am concerned that a settlement in favour of one might disadvantage the others.

Within recent months, I have noticed that the complexities of intellectual property management have troubled innovation – recent examples include the repertoire of music offered by Spotify (<http://tinyurl.com/craqbe>), and the decision by Google to block music videos (<http://tinyurl.com/bw93z9>). There is commercial posturing on both sides of these arguments, however I believe that arguments of this sort suggest that current IPR arrangements do not deliver optimal results for creators, entrepreneurs or consumers. The education sector, particularly in its support of open learning content, is one of the leaders in the complex discourse around a fit-for-purpose IPR framework for a digital future. It may be that there is some merit in the view that music rights-holders were in part responsible for undermining attitudes to music and copyright through their reluctance to embrace the opportunities of digital distribution, allowing the US IT industry, with its deep pockets, in the end, to begin to offer the kinds of services that consumers want.

Nevertheless, I welcome the report's proposal of a Rights Agency to incentivise legal use of copyright material. I see this as an opportunity for educators to spread knowledge, as well as other providers to sell entertainment. I believe that the effectiveness of a Rights Agency will to a large extent be determined by the rights-owners who inform its development. Higher Education is a significant creator of content, and has a well-developed and sophisticated discourse about intellectual property. I believe educators would welcome wider consultation on a Rights Agency: I envisage it as an opt-in collecting society that allows ISPs to legalise their users' activities. I believe that the work of a Rights Agency will certainly be helped by common standards for digital content, though I am less convinced that technical counter-measures to infringement are either desirable or effective. Rather, I am concerned at the potential loss of content to society and its heritage as technical counter-measures are obsoleted.

I note that where the report indicates that Apple's iTunes has "embraced" the technical counter-measure of DRM in music, it is actually inaccurate - Apple iTunes is in the process of abandoning DRM in music.

I am concerned that the report suggests a "policing" role for ISPs, and I await the detailed proposals. I note that academic institutions, the regional MANs, and the national research and teaching network, JANET, perform an ISP-like function for students whilst they are using our facilities. I do not wish to see a generation criminalised for want of effective education about rights, and for want of genuine innovation in IPR and licensing regimes.

I fully support the aim for plural public service provision, though agree that an aim of this ambition is likely to require interventions in the market. I believe that a plural public service provision should both produce content for reuse, and foster user- and community-generated content. Further and higher education, schools, and the voluntary sector have a role in supporting and developing a rich community of content creation.

Universal connectivity

I welcome the proposals for a universal service obligation for broadband. I recognise that setting the speed for a USO is a difficult and detailed process. I am also aware that the pace of innovation in online content is fast. I am concerned that at 2Mb/s a universal commitment risks becoming the de facto service for disadvantaged consumers and regions. I believe that, given the time-scale for the delivery of an effective universal service commitment, it is important that a suitable capacity for innovation in, for example moving image, 3D, and telepresence, is built in.

I believe the post-16 education sector has a vital role to play in ensuring digital inclusion. Further and higher education has been at the forefront of adopting open, standards-based networking for enhancing life potential. It will continue to play an important role in the provision of skills, and the provision of content. As cities and districts consider digital delivery such as public wireless networks, education can be an effective partner in adding value and extending use.

Equipping everyone

I believe clear and detailed thinking is required to unpack the challenges of equipping everyone for Britain's digital future. I note in passing that parts of the public sector do not concur on the acronym for the underpinning technologies and practices – ICT, or IT.

When the line between a mobile phone and a computer is becoming increasingly blurred, what do we mean by "computer" skills? Foremost, I believe an understanding of a

networked world, a connected economy. This includes “traditional” skills – literacy, critical thinking, analysis, reasoning, soft social skills, and an awareness of where, and how, technology can support, enhance, or transform these skills.

At the same time, I am aware that technology’s disruptive power is transforming the creative industries, challenging existing business models and social settlements. Change is certain. Staff at Ravensbourne seek to produce graduates who thrive and prosper in changing times, who drive change, or surf its waves.

These skills are as, if not more, important than an understanding of digital tools for productive use.

Indeed, the approach to tooling itself must be oriented around change – “word-processing skills” does not mean “Word training”, and should be grounded in the principles that make it open to the collaborative possibilities of SaaS online word-processors such as Google Apps. That is, software tools are themselves evolving as our experience of software matures, and as faster networks, and better service management practices, open up opportunities for new forms of computer-mediated collaboration and content-production. I believe the computer-mediation of collaboration (for want of a better term) will have significant effects on both the soft, and the computer/mobile-device using competencies learners will need in the future. Moreover, that learning is two-sided – many learners already use these computer-mediated tools (“social software”) on a regular basis to manage their social lives.

The success of Silicon Valley isn’t entirely one of technical education. A confluence of social, commercial, and educational factors are at work. Business and communication skills are an important complement to creative or technical ability, as is a learning landscape that encourages innovation, experimentation, and actualisation.

Employers in the creative industries need employees who can use both today’s technology, and exploit tomorrow’s. Building on media literacy, we support a broader digital literacy, that can be effectively supported through practical, creative education.