

DIGITAL BRITAIN: INTERIM REPORT

A RESPONSE FROM SCREEN ENGLAND

Screen England is the network organisation for the nine Regional Screen Agencies of England. These agencies (funded by UK Film Council, national lottery, Regional Development Agencies, the European Regional Development Fund and other partnerships) have cultural and commercial remits, with a strong emphasis on the creative uses of media which extends well beyond film to any digital media platform.

In the seven years since they were established, they have developed a brokering role which is greatly valued by local and regional authorities, bringing together partnerships that bridge traditional gaps between popular media culture, the arts, the fostering of creative businesses, learning and skills development and community engagement. They work closely with their Regional Development Agencies to build creative businesses, with a strong but not exclusive focus on screen-related digital media.

They see talent development as key to this process and all have close working relationships with the Learning and Skills Council, Skillset, Business Links and other regional and national agencies related to skills and business development. They contribute to the growth of visual culture by working formally with education institutions and with informal providers and community organisations, ranging from schools and libraries to film clubs and youth groups. The purpose of this activity is to encourage groups and individuals who feel themselves to be marginalised to use media to explore and express their views of the world; to raise their ambitions, technically and creatively; and to provide pathways into the creative industries for those who want to take them.

They host and support a wide range of community-based and specialist film festivals and other events aimed at providing platforms for those who want to show their work or learn from the work of others. They seek partnerships in rural as well as urban areas, recognising that for many people, especially young people, geographic isolation brings its own forms of disadvantage.

In addition, they fund the development and production of commercial feature and documentary films for theatrical release and for television. They provide support services, such as location-finding, for UK and international film productions and are closely connected to creative media businesses in their areas.

This cross-disciplinary range of functions makes each of the Agencies a valuable player in their own region, while the Screen England network is beginning to give the nine Agencies together the ability to leverage that value to an all-England scale, allowing them to combine the effectiveness and sensitivity of established regional networks with the ability to act strategically at national level.

We believe this gives the Regional Screen Agencies and Screen England an important role to play in realising the ambitions set out in the Digital Britain interim report. Of the five key objectives listed in the Interim Report we see Screen England as making a significant contribution to four, namely:-

- A dynamic investment climate for UK digital content
- UK content for UK users ... that serves the interests, experiences and needs of all UK citizens
- Fairness and access for all... to enable near-universal participation in the digital economy and digital society
- Developing the infrastructure, skills and take-up to enable the widespread online delivery of public services and business interface with Government

The Report sets out, in considerable detail, proposals for the future organisation of the existing public service broadcasters. Important though that undoubtedly will be, the fundamental reality of the digital world is that content and services of great public value will be – indeed already is – coming from an infinitely broader range of sources than was possible in the analogue world. To optimise the creative, technological and commercial possibilities that generates, agencies such as Screen England that can provide ‘on-the-ground’ opportunities for the acquisition

of new skills and can broker partnerships that connect training, business formation and popular culture, will have a crucially important role.

For example, the Interim Report states that there are “a wide range of voices and talent from across the UK, secured in part by ensuring the continuation and development of creative talent clusters in the regions and nations, currently guaranteed through regional production quotas on some public service broadcasters.” The reality, however, is that whole regions of England are in imminent danger of being left devoid of any production entities delivering media content for national networks. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that intensifying cost pressures on the big established broadcasters will only exacerbate this trend. If Digital Britain is to enjoy, in the words of the Interim Report, “a wide range of voices and talent from across the UK”, it will be through the activity of organisations such as Screen England and the Screen Agencies that the values and qualities traditionally associated with public service broadcasting can be practically and effectively re-configured for the digital age.

The Interim Report identifies the varying requirements of citizens who will need ‘digital life skills’, ‘digital work skills’ and ‘digital economy skills’. It also draws attention to the need to avoid treating education and training for digital technology as “just another ‘vertical’ subject area”. The reality is that for many people there are significant barriers to moving from one ‘level’ of digital skills to another, unless they have the information to plan their route in the light of locally available skills training and job opportunities. Here, again, the multi-disciplinary nature of the Screen Agencies, combined with the national overview provided by Screen England, provides a flexible, market-intelligent resource that can help local and regional authorities develop and sustain creative activity and contribute to national goals.

We look forward to contributing to your ongoing work as you prepare your final report later this year.