

Response to Digital Britain Interim Report

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There are numerous references in the report to public participation, the importance of supporting UK generated content, and the development of skills to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new media economy. While all this is to be welcomed, the report frames it's objectives and proposals in relation to the existing broadcast media models, and pays far less attention to the new possibilities offered by high speed internet connectivity.

While the role of existing broadcasters will continue to be vital to the media industry, there is little evidence that a key element of the internet, enabling real community participation, has been considered sufficiently. Participation should not be seen simply as responding to initiatives taken by existing broadcasters. Adding a small amount of user-generated content to the BBC or Channel 4 websites is an insufficient reponse to the challenges and opportunities presented by universal broadband access. Government needs to look beyond UGC and the Public Service Broadcasting model, to Community Generated Content, and Public Engagement Broadcasting.

Community Generated Content (CGC) can be defined as content which Originates from, is produced by, and gives benefit to, a defined community. The community could be geographic, cultural, or interest based. Public Engagement Broadcasting (PEB) can be defined as the process of including communities in the policy making, commissioning, and distribution processes for CGC. In such a model, the role of government would be to support identified communities with investment and training, enabling them to produce and distribute content over digital networks that relates to their culture, experiences, and interests.

Examples of community initiatives in this field already exist, such as Felixstowe TV <http://www.felixstowetv.co.uk/> a local internet TV station in operation for over 4 years, Inspired-Stories TV <http://www.inspired-stories.tv/> run for and by people with mental health issues, Kent TV <http://www.kenttv.com/> a County Council run site, and many others. If the final report is to propose a universal service at levels of 2-4Mb then it should also include proposals for community involvement which can take advantage of this level of service. This will require involvement of the existing broadcast media, but also a wider range of independent initiatives, such as those mentioned above.

One benefit of such an approach is that it could take advantage of existing community assets, constraining costs in a difficult economic environment. For example, a local internet-tv station could use the media education facilities of its local schools and colleges for training and production. Students could produce short films and videos for community groups, giving them experience of working to a client brief, as well as a wider audience for their programmes. Tourism promotion, local history, culture, and sport, could all gain much higher profiles, with sponsorship coming from local public and private sectors. Small production companies could find new clients, and platforms to promote their services.

This approach would require co-ordination of resources at local level. The exact nature of this could vary from area to area depending on the community structures and level of resources already available. The essential point is that community generated content production and distribution provides new opportunities for education, training, social cohesion and inclusion, as well as promoting local digital economies.

In the section on networks, the report states “The Government will help implement the Community Broadband Network’s proposals for an umbrella body to bring together all the local and community networks and provide them with technical and advisory support.” This commitment needs to be extended from supporting local initiatives developing technical infrastructure, to supporting a wider range of community initiatives for producing and distributing digital content.

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