

Towards a digital future



An estimated six million people in Britain are both socially and digitally excluded. What will the much-vaunted Digital Britain White Paper do to reach them and why does it matter to adult learning policy, asks **RACHEL THOMSON**

A month ago, a French court ruled that internet access is a basic human right. Gordon Brown has said it is as crucial for people as electricity and water. Yet, 17 million Britons are still excluded from digital technology and an estimated 13 per cent of the population – some six million people – are both socially and digitally excluded. There are varying degrees of engagement across different media, with over one-third (36 per cent) of adults not having access to a computer and over two-fifths (42 per cent) lacking access to the internet, according to NIACE's most recent Annual Media Literacy Survey, published in November 2008.

Lord Stephen Carter's Digital Britain report, published in June, aims to set that straight. Its diagnosis of the problem is stark, troubling and worth quoting at length. It says:

We are at a tipping point in relation to the online world. It is moving from conferring advantage on those who are in it to conferring active disadvantage on those who are without, whether... [on] offers and discounts, lower utility bills, access to information and access to public services. Despite that increasing disadvantage there are several obstacles facing those that are off-line: availability, affordability, capability and relevance ...

... Those without access to the Internet suffer economic disadvantage. Their opportunities and livelihoods can be compromised by exclusion from the digital world.

More fundamentally, they miss out on areas of learning for themselves and their families and, increasingly, they may begin to miss out on accessing the full benefits of online public services from health to financial services and employment advice. They miss out on the easy access to relevant information, from the daily updates on weather or transport, to important breaking news at local, regional, national or international levels. Access to news is part of daily life as well as an essential ingredient for democracy.

Finally, people miss out on leisure activities and creative development which is

increasingly part of the 'social glue' for friends, families, communities of interest and society as a whole.

The concern of isolation and loneliness, of being the person in a social group who gets left behind, who fails to understand or follow cultural references, are as powerful as motivators for some sectors of society to acquire and improve their digital skills, as the more obvious economic, educational and democratic benefits.

Lord Carter sets out a raft of measures to address these problems – and to sustain Britain's position as a leading digital economy and society – including: a three-year national plan to improve digital participation; universal access to today's broadband services by 2012; a 'next-generation' fund for investment in tomorrow's broadband services; digital radio upgrade by the end of 2015; support for public service content partnerships; a revised digital remit for Channel 4; and consultation on funding options for national, regional and local news.

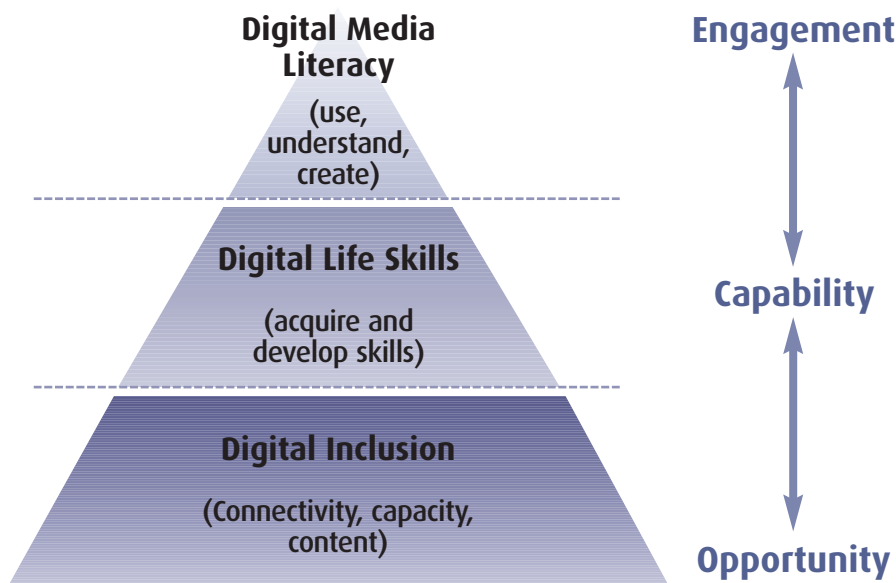
Of course, the concerns set out by Lord Carter are not new. NIACE has been supported by Ofcom, the broadcasting regulator, since 2005 to promote media literacy. Over this time, we've produced two guides for adult learning practitioners; run a number of media literacy conferences; and piloted TV/media clubs on a grassroots basis, as well as engaging people in media literacy-related activities for Adult Learners' Week.

For many years, NIACE research has pointed to the absolute correlation between the learning poor, the digitally poor and the economically poor, yet most existing work in this area has focused on the needs of children, schools and teachers. Lord Carter's report helps – crucially – to redress this balance, in a number of important ways. That, in a nutshell, is why Digital Britain matters to adult learning policy, why we need to take notice of its contents and participate actively in its implementation.

In the weighty 238-page report, there are important proposals about the 'tubes and pipes' – strengthening the UK's communications infrastructure capabilities; the growth of our creative industries; legal and regulatory frameworks to tackle piracy (though the

Government, in proposing to cut the internet connection of people engaging in online piracy, has already discarded part of the report's recommendations in this area); the future of public service broadcasting; and frameworks for digital safety and security. But, arguably, the two most important features are the development of a national plan for digital participation and the recommendation (from Estelle Morris's Independent Review of ICT User Skills) about a 'Digital Life Skills Entitlement'.

I'd like to focus on the first of these. The following diagrammatic representation from Ofcom of how these bits might fit together has provoked all sorts of debate about the shape that's emerging.



There's a developing ecology around this whole area – a spectrum which stretches from digital inclusion/access issues at one end to media literacy/creativity/critical evaluation issues at the other, with digital participation being the newly built bridge in between.

And, as someone said at a meeting I attended recently, 'Perhaps this could be conceptualised as a series of concentric circles which can both exist separately and bleed into each other'.

According to the Digital Britain report, the term 'media literacy' has been abandoned as technocratic and incomprehensible and 'digital participation' takes its place. It is defined as follows: 'Increasing the reach, breadth and depth of digital technology use across all sections of society, to maximise digital participation and the economic and social benefits it can bring.'

The report calls for the formation of a 'consortium of stakeholders', led by Ofcom, to drive digital participation – and NIACE has agreed in principle to be part of such a group.

The thinking behind this part of the Digital Britain proposals is sound. To achieve a digitally engaged population requires action

to motivate those not yet engaged – and this will best be achieved through a systematic, sustained and co-ordinated approach. Such a programme will have two linked strands which relate to adult learning – a *communications campaign*, supported by *targeted outreach* to engage those who need more support. Interestingly, the formalisation of the consortium of stakeholders to drive the new National Plan for Digital Participation is identified as the first priority in the report's timetable for further action, to be completed 'as soon as practicable' by Ofcom and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The first, embryonic meeting of the consortium took place this summer. There

rural areas; in areas of multiple deprivation; skilled and non-skilled working class; unemployed; disabled; faced with learning difficulties; from low-income households; affected by mental ill-health; and homeless or vulnerably housed.

After 12 months, the work of the consortium will be evaluated against four engagement metrics – each of which is a desirable aim in itself – and, importantly, each is measurable. *Reach* is about access, the number of households online and the volume of people using the internet outside the home. *Breadth* is about modes of usage and consumption, in terms, for example, of communication, online shopping, content consumption and/or the use of public services. *Depth* has meaning with respect to user contributions, comments, the joining of social-networking sites, user-generated content, self-publishing, content creation and the uploading and sharing of photos and so on. The fourth measurement – *social/economic* – is particularly about the impact of this work on disadvantaged groups and communities and on economic recovery.

The consortium comprises: broadcasters – the BBC, Channel 4, BSkyB; internet service providers like BT, Virgin Media and Blackberry; a raft of government departments, led by Business, Innovation and Skills but also including the departments for Communities and Local Government and Culture, Media and Sport, and officials representing each of the UK nations; mobile phone operators; the Broadband Stakeholder Group; social networking representatives; and organisations we in our sector are more used to working with, including Becta, UK Online centres, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, the Tate and the British Library.

And its work starts now – despite its timetable not being quite firmed-up as yet. The consortium will be formally launched in the autumn and, over the coming three years, £12 million will be available to support this area of work – although to whom, and how, this money will be distributed isn't clear either at this early stage in the proceedings.

With the development of communications technology and increasing integration of communications media, it seems as if we've turned a corner – with digital participation beginning to be understood more broadly, beyond the enlightened community of e-learning evangelists, as being as important as traditional literacy, language and numeracy learning.

Media messages influence us as individuals, but they also affect our families, friends, communities and society. Media makers convey specific messages but people receive and interpret these differently, based on their own prior knowledge and experience, their values and beliefs. What we see and hear from the media, from digital sources, shape our sense of reality and our understanding of the world around us.



Digital Britain: the key points

On 17 October 2008, Lord Carter, then Minister for Communications, Technology and Broadcasting, began work on an action plan to help Britain make the most of new media and to ensure it is at the leading edge of the global digital economy. The strategic vision that resulted was dubbed the Digital Britain report.

The final version of the report was published on 16 June 2009, tackling a wide range of different issues, from broadband speed to internet regulation, supporting local news and public service broadcasting. The report is one of the central policy commitments in the Government's Building Britain's Future plan and draft legislative programme. It aims to be 'a guide-path for how Britain can sustain its position as a leading digital economy and society'.

The report's main points include:

- A three-year national plan to improve digital participation, combining 'an improved offer to increase motivation to get online, with social networking and outreach, and with skills training';
- Universal access to today's broadband by 2012 – more than one in 10 households today cannot enjoy a 2Mbps (megabits per second) connection;

- A fund – based on a levy of 50 pence per month on all landlines – to invest in next-generation broadband networks;
- Digital radio upgrade – so that all national broadcast radio stations are DAB-only – by the end of 2015;
- Mobile spectrum liberalisation, enhancing 3G coverage and accelerating next-generation mobile services;
- A 'robust' legal and regulatory framework to combat digital piracy;
- Support for public service content partnerships;
- A revised digital remit for Channel 4; and
- Consultation on how to fund local, national and regional news (including the possibility that a proportion of the TV licence fee be used to fund alternative news sources).

The Government has since published the Digital Britain Implementation Plan, formally setting out the future governance arrangements and programme plan for the delivery of the 70-plus actions contained in the final report.

Both publications can be accessed at: www.culture.gov.uk.

Digital participation helps people to consume media with a critical eye, evaluating sources, intended purposes, persuasion techniques and deeper meanings. New technology has allowed millions of people to make digital contributions – emails, websites, videos, blogs, podcasts, tweets and more – and giving citizens the chance to create their own stuff is another important part of a digital Britain. NIACE is pleased that the publication of this report affords opportunities to increase public and practitioner awareness of this important topic.

As David Lammy, Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, said in a speech to Demos in June:

Communication and virtual media are allowing people to organise and create their own shared solutions far beyond traditional organisational structures. Wherever we are, virtual media can now allow us to participate in events elsewhere in real time. Whether it's Tamils in Parliament Square or reformers in Tehran, using Twitter and Facebook to mobilise in ways and at speeds we have never seen before – then broadcasting their efforts to the world on YouTube – a community of participants these days usually extends far beyond the people who are physically there.

More and more of us are realising how important it is to have a digital framework that is open to new people and new perspectives; that elevates human values over commercial concerns; and that serves the

requirements of citizens today and in the future. The need to develop our critical awareness is also increasingly recognised, as is the ability for all of us who consume media to evaluate the quality and veracity of the messages we receive. Appreciating how and why digital messages are put together is important too. People are taking action, creating new alternatives – and NIACE hopes to continue to engage more and different adults in digital participation activities of all kinds – in workplaces, community organisations, further and higher education institutions, libraries and other public spaces across the country; particularly as all this ties in so nicely with the informal adult learning agenda and the roll-out of Transformation Fund-supported projects.

In April 2005 the Oscar-winning filmmaker Lord David Puttnam, wrote the foreword to NIACE's *Getting Inside the Box*. No one could sum up better the importance of this area to the adult learning firmament:

Media literacy is about creating something positive – it is about empowering people by providing them with the cultural awareness, the critical knowledge and creative skills which will help them to understand the way the media shapes the way in which we view the world. At its heart, it is about audiences. By developing analytical skills among people of all ages and encouraging participation, media literacy can only contribute to the cultural and creative stock of the nation.

Rachel Thomson is NIACE's Senior Programme Director (Campaigns)

HAVE YOUR SAY

Digital Britain provides a framework for shaping adult learning opportunities resulting from the development of the country's communications infrastructure. As its recommendations begin to be implemented we hope *Adults Learning* readers will contribute to the debate. These are some of the questions we think matter:

- Does Digital Britain demonstrate an adequate grasp of the difficulty of engaging the digitally excluded?
- Were Lord Carter and his team right to abandon as outmoded the term 'media literacy'?
- Are the resources there to ensure that all adults have the opportunity to learn to access, understand and use digital technology?

Contribute to the Digital Britain debate by emailing: comment@niace.org.uk.

We asked a range of experts, stakeholders and commentators on digital inclusion to respond to the Digital Britain White Paper and reflect on its likely impact. Turn to page 12 to read their reactions.