

The **Digital Britain** White Paper outlines the Government's vision for the digital future of the country.

We asked a number of industry experts, stakeholders, politicians and commentators how they viewed the report and its likely repercussions

Increasing digital participation is critical to maximising future economic competitiveness, writes **Siôn Simon**

Practically every area of our lives in the twenty-first century relies on some kind of digital infrastructure to function, with our financial institutions, public services, transport networks and energy grids all underpinned by digital technology.

Clear proof that we are already digitally enabled, and a digitally dependent economy and society, is provided in the fact that, today, the typical British consumer spends nearly half their waking hours 'engaged' in one form or another.

The Digital Britain White Paper has set out for the first time the importance of the digital economy to the nation's economic future. It is a plan for action to maximise the benefits of the digital revolution, both for the people of Britain and for our future prosperity.

But if we want to maximise our inter-



The
revolution
will be
digitised

national competitiveness we need to make sure that everyone shares in the benefits of a digital Britain by increasing digital participation right across society.

We need to make sure that all those who want to participate have the capability to do so, and we're taking a number of steps to make this possible. We need to address the three main obstacles to digital inclusion: availability, affordability and capability.

On availability, we've committed to a universal service for broadband at 2Mbps (megabits per second) by 2012; putting us at the forefront of European countries. We've also proposed for the first time to provide funds to support the rollout of superfast broadband in areas the market is unlikely to reach, paid for through a small levy on landlines.

The future success of a digital Britain is equally dependent on having enough people with the right skills in the right place at the right time to develop and apply new technologies. Our aim is to drive UK digital skills to the top three globally. To achieve this we will be investing in skills and learning so that the pipeline of talent starts in primary school and carries on through to university

and beyond.

Martha Lane Fox has been appointed Champion for Digital Inclusion and she will be working hard to tackle digital exclusion and the economic and social disadvantages it can cause.

We are developing a National Plan for Digital Participation to make sure more people across all sections of society make use of digital technology and are aware of the enormous economic and social benefits it can bring. It will be delivered through tailored local and community-based projects and will give people the motivation to become engaged, demonstrating the relevance and benefits of digital participation to those who have yet to get involved. Some public services are already delivered exclusively online, and the move to universal broadband availability in 2012 will be the trigger for a programme of digital switchover of services such as student loans and school registration.

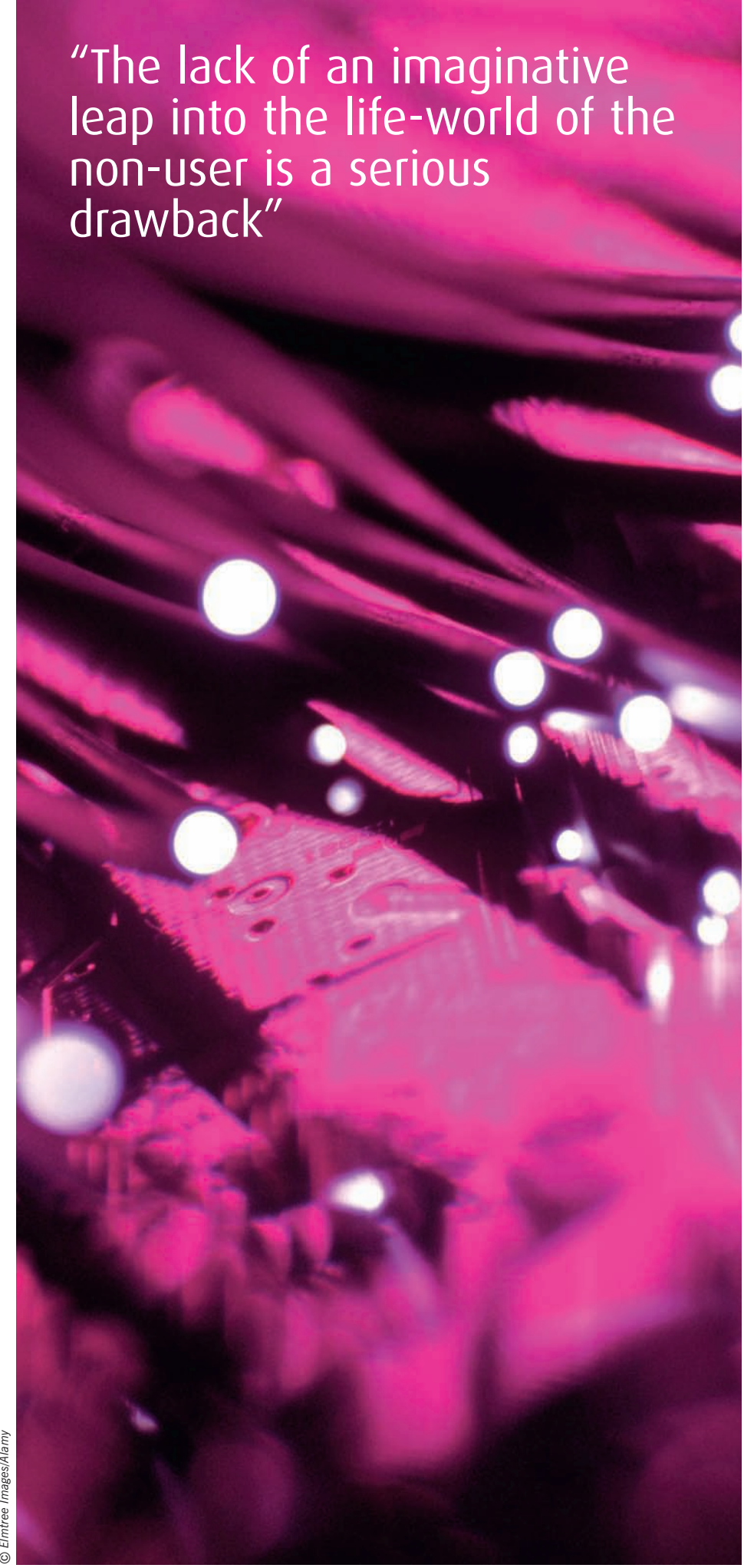
Digital Britain also set out actions to address the dramatic changes taking place in broadcasting. The revolution in technology means old business models are creaking and we need to act now to preserve the high-quality public service broadcasting that

viewers value. With commercial broadcasters under pressure, a strong, confident BBC is more vital than ever, and it will remain the cornerstone of public service content provision.

But it is important that the BBC is not left as the sole source of high-quality, UK-originated, public service content. This is particularly true for impartial news, in the nations, regions and locally, where the pressures are most immediate on all traditional media. News is a central part of our democracy, and essential to holding public institutions to account. That is why we are consulting on whether a small proportion of the television licence fee, currently used for digital switchover and not for BBC content and services, could be retained to contribute to the funding of alternative sources of news. We are open to other ideas and we are seeking views from the industry and the public on this proposal and any other that could emerge.

The Digital Britain White Paper sets out a path to enable Britain to sustain its place as a leading digital economy and society. It is not just a vision; it gives a clear plan of action for how this will be achieved. Work has already begun on the legislation that will be needed to





“The lack of an imaginative leap into the life-world of the non-user is a serious drawback”

make it a reality.

It is those countries and governments that act now to push their digital communications sectors forward that will gain a substantial and long-standing competitive advantage. We want everyone to realise their potential – the importance of a digital Britain to our wider economy and society should not be underestimated.

Siôn Simon is Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Creative Industries, in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Much more will be needed to engage the non-users who just don't see the relevance of digital technology to their lives, argues **Mike Cushman**

The Carter report is a long and complex document attempting to address a wide range of public policy issues, many of them highly contentious.

The report pays attention to 'Digital Life Skills' and the needs of the 11.6 million adults who are digitally excluded. However, the problem is seen entirely as a skills issue to be solved by help-lines and a wide range of access points for skills training. The joint LSE/NIACE Penceil project (<http://pencil.lse.ac.uk>) explored the life experiences of non-users of ICTs. The findings of that project showed that while skills and access are important issues they are not the key obstacles to digital engagement.

The research disclosed that underlying people's reluctance to engage in developing skills and access was a more fundamental issue of attitude to technology and making a connection between technology use and the achievement of an individual's life tasks. It is obvious to the writers of the report that involvement in digital technologies contributes to a more efficient and enriching life; it is far less obvious to digital outsiders. The lack of an imaginative leap into the life-world of the non-user is a serious drawback in the report and contributes to the reduction of an engagement programme to a training programme.

The scope of the single point of contact is to ask: 'Do you have access to a computer?'; 'Where do you want to learn?'; 'What support do you need to learn?'; and 'How do you want to learn?'. All good and relevant questions that imply flexibility and variety in offering training but all dependent on a service that will help people answer the question, 'How will engagement make my life better?' for themselves. This is, of course, not the sort of question that learndirect-style help-lines are equipped to deal with.

There is a need for trusted intermediaries and *animateurs* who will engage in conversations, individual and group, that will lead to satisfying answers that will develop individual intentions to learn and use.

There is little sense in the report of the financial barriers to access that many people face even if they decide to use digital technologies. While hardware, especially serviceable second-hand hardware, continues to become cheaper, the same is not true of software. There is no commitment to supporting the development and use of free/open source software such as Open Office or Linux. Facilitating and promoting the use of free alternatives to the products of Microsoft and Adobe and their peers must be part of an inclusion strategy.

The report's range, and consequent incoherence, is illustrated by its discussion of the abandonment of analogue radio in favour of DAB. Even setting aside the many critiques that have been made of the technological inadequacies of the UK DAB format and its poor-quality sound, the proposal is problematic on inclusion grounds. It represents a switch from a well-understood and easy-to-use technology to a new and more difficult-to-use technology – a DAB radio has far more confusing controls than a conventional set – and demands that people replace several or more radios in their home at a cost that is inconsequential to the report writers but significant to someone living on minimum wage, benefits or a pension. Unlike television where one can plug in a freeview box to an existing set, DAB requires new equipment and the consignment of useable equipment to an environmentally hazardous waste mountain.

The report sets out a road to a digital utopia not a way of living in the always incompletely digital world which will be Britain in 2020 and beyond.

Mike Cushman is Research Fellow and Information and Communication Manager, Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science

The report misses the vital importance of media literacy in helping create the kind of critical, informed and politically engaged citizenry it says we need, writes **Cary Bazalgette**

Education is not the main focus of the Digital Britain report. Its remit was to investigate how digital technologies can support cleaner politics, economic recovery and the reform of public services. So, understandably, it is preoccupied with solutions to the problems of unequal access, both to digital connection and to basic digital skills. These are obviously important issues and it will be interesting to see how this and any future government negotiates the imperatives of providing connectivity and skills to the oldest and most disadvantaged sectors of society if, at the same time, they fail to close the widening gulf between rich and poor:

Where the report does deal with education (in Chapter Six), it samples more or less uncritically the PR material from existing initiatives such as the digitisation of important cultural archives, the achievements of specialist schools and academies, the Creative and Media Diploma, the UK Film Council's national education strategy, and Creative Partnerships. The report's key theme here is that education 'ensures a healthy pipeline of talent' – a metaphor which evokes the narrowing of focus towards a talented minority, rather than a broadening of opportunity for all. The initiatives are described primarily in terms of their promotion of digital technology usage, rather than acknowledging the more profound learning attainments that these initiatives are undoubtedly helping to develop. It is also unfortunate that they are focused almost entirely on children and young people, leaving one to conclude that while adults – particularly those over 65 – need just the basic skills, the excitements of the digital world are a privilege of youth.

So what about the basic educational entitlements of those Digital Britain citizens not destined for jobs in the digital industries? For this we have to turn to Chapter Two (pp. 39-40), which attempts to address media literacy. The 2003 Communications Act gave the media regulator, Ofcom, a duty to 'work with others to promote media literacy'. Mindful of the wide range of 'others' it would have to bring on board, Ofcom produced a definition of media literacy unlikely to offend anybody: 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts' (www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/of_med_lit/whatis/), and has done its best to fulfil this remit. However, some would question the wisdom of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in saddling a regulator with responsibilities for learning and skills, areas more usually associated with the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the Digital Britain report found that amongst Ofcom's partners 'there were numerous working definitions of media literacy but no consistent one. The term "media literacy" was a technocratic and specialist term understood by policy makers but not really part of everyday language' and that 'there were a number of organisations and initiatives aiming to address media literacy. But the approach being adopted was very fragmented'. Unfortunately, however, it then proposes to substitute 'digital participation' for 'media literacy', in the interests of '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'.

This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of media literacy and a failure to address its vital importance in helping to generate exactly the kind of critical, informed and politically engaged citizenry that the report claims we need. A more challenging and explicit conceptualisation can be found in the Charter for

Media Literacy, which spells out seven characteristics of a media literate person, including the ability to 'make effective use of media in the exercise of ... democratic rights and civic responsibilities' (www.euromedia-literacy.eu/charter.php).

It is important to recognise the crucial importance of the report's emphasis on widening access to decent broadband connections and winning over those who lack the skills and confidence to use them. However, no one should be surprised that its pronouncements on media literacy are skewed towards a simplistic, technicist view of learning. In the long run, there will be a lot more to teaching and learning in a digital environment than most people can yet imagine, but the Digital Britain report is not the place to start looking for it.

Cary Bazalgette is Chair of the Media Education Association. She is writing in a personal capacity

It isn't enough to have the technology in place, we have to make it work harder for us, says **Christine Lewis**

At Becta our role is to lead the national *Harnessing Technology* strategy. *Harnessing Technology* unites the education, training and skills sectors to ensure that all learners benefit from the effective use of technology in education and training programmes. So, it goes without saying that the Digital Britain report is particularly important to our work and towards delivering wider social inclusion, skills and economic competitiveness through technology-enabled learning.

Digital Britain is part of a wider agenda influencing digital opportunities for adults, including Estelle Morris's Independent Review of ICT User Skills. Baroness Morris's review, for which we at Becta provided the research and professional advice, is highlighted in the report and endorses the notion of 'digital life skills entitlement for all adults'.

The report highlights Becta's Home Access project, piloted in Oldham and Suffolk and bringing computers and connectivity to parents, children and low-income families. The national rollout of the Home Access programme is now underway, and we see significant benefits to be had by providing whole families with access to online public and commercial services. By providing computers and connectivity to whole families, adults will also benefit by gaining access to technology that they can use at times convenient to them.

Furthermore, *The Learning Revolution*, published in March, places considerable emphasis on the role that technology and broadcasting can play in transforming the way in which people learn. We at Becta have been tasked with developing this area of work, including the production of an online portal for informal learning opportunities and low- or no-cost spaces, and an online directory of resources.

Collectively, the implications of all three initiatives are significant for an adult learning and skills agenda that embraces the effective use of technology. Naturally, we at Becta welcome this.

This isn't simply about having the technology in place; it's about making it work harder in a more efficient way. Crucially, it is about what learners and providers do with technology and how they make effective and efficient use of it. We therefore welcome the attention the report gives to developing ICT skills and understanding how to make creative use of technology.

Becta will continue to press for further improvements to the level of connectivity available in schools, colleges and training institutions alongside the Home Access programme. It's vital that learners of all ages experience the best technology tools and transfer the confidence and experience gained in education to the workplace and society. We know that technology can improve learners' motivation, progress and results, so we will continue our role to ensure that the whole of the education and training system can take advantage of the benefits, efficiencies and value of the best technology.

Over 15 million adults in the UK still do not make use of the internet. Many of them are socially excluded as well as digitally excluded. Digital Britain offers an opportunity to bring together the many areas that will impact on the digitally excluded. Through *Harnessing Technology*, Becta will lead and challenge at a national level to support the areas where technology enables this, including adult learning.

Christine Lewis is Director for Harnessing Technology in FE and Skills, at Becta, the government's technology agency

Our future prosperity – and the success of Digital Britain – depends on our arresting the growing digital divide, argues **Jocelyn Hay**

Lord Carter's Digital Britain looks forward to a very different future in which the state, and virtually every individual, is dependent on electronic communications to a degree unimaginable today. His aim is to devise a strategy to enable the public to prepare for change which will affect all aspects of life, from formal schooling and education to the workplace, health, consumer purchasing, leisure and entertainment. If it is to succeed, and both the nation and its individual citizens are to benefit, we shall all need to engage in a new learning process and become far more media literate. If we do, the UK has a chance to be at the forefront of prosperous nations; if we don't, we face an ever-growing divide between those who can and those who can't participate and benefit from the many opportunities it will bring. The task is

formidable: the report says up to a quarter of the UK population – 15 million adults – do not use the internet. And that number includes a disproportionate percentage of the over-65s and those already socially excluded due to economic circumstances, health or location.

It is welcome, therefore, that the report emphasises the need to improve formal education, from primary school through to university – a review by Sir Jim Rose (April 2009) recommends that IT joins maths and English as a core subject. A review of ICT-user skills for adults by Estelle Morris identifies a shortage of skilled workers and points out that those with IT skills already command between three and 10 per cent higher salaries than those without. This gap will grow.

But IT skills are also becoming more important in life outside the workplace. Ironically, often offering the potential to improve the lives of those currently most excluded – the elderly, socially disadvantaged or physically isolated. They are the ones who could benefit most from cheaper online banking and shopping, online health access and from simpler and cheaper ways to keep in touch with family and friends. The Minister for Digital Inclusion will be responsible for promoting these needs and for ensuring better coordination and value for money from the millions of pounds currently being spent by different government, commercial and third-sector agencies, on a variety of different schemes and initiatives throughout the UK. The Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV) therefore welcomes the report's recommendations and its concern to increase the participation and competency of those not yet online.

The launch of the Government's *Learning Revolution* Transformation Fund – which is being administered by NIACE – will provide many opportunities for small and large community groups to develop exciting new initiatives. It is not a moment too soon.

The revolution is proceeding rapidly with the conversion of the UK to digital TV, already the only choice available in many Western counties. It will be complete by 2012. It brings the convergence of television, telecoms and the internet, and the public will need to be prepared if they are to take full advantage of its benefits and not risk exclusion or invasion of privacy, loss of personal data or identity, or simply to avoid receiving distasteful unsolicited material.

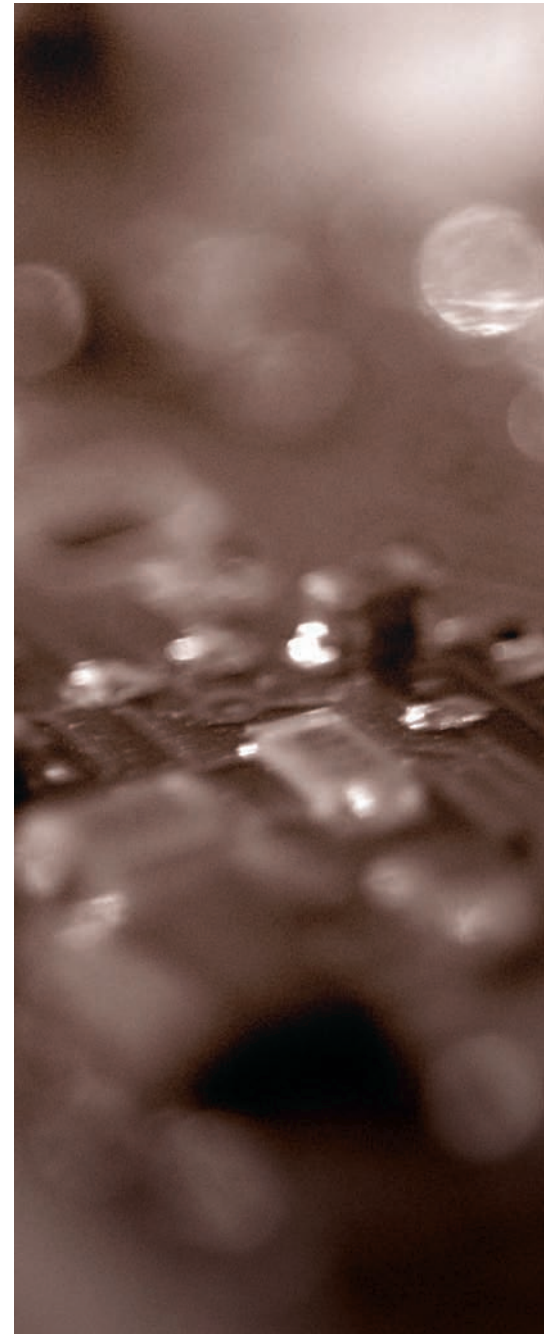
Demand is high, as VLV discovered at its April conference on *Making the Most of the New Media – how the over-65s can get to grips with the new technology*. The conference was supported by Ofcom and BT, and all the major broadcasters, telecoms services and internet service providers took part together with NIACE and UK Online. These, especially the broadcasters, are the organisations best placed to promote and encourage participation in the different training schemes, and VLV intends to build on its good relationships with them to take the matter forward in a variety of ways, some of which will depend on funding from a bid to the *Learning Revolution* fund.

While VLV does not agree with all the recommendations in Digital Britain, we certainly applaud and support the evidence and recommendations it gives for increasing participation and media literacy amongst the whole population.

Jocelyn Hay is the founder and Honorary President of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer

We need to ensure that all, not just the few, are given the opportunity to become media literate, says **Don Foster**

After much hype, the final Digital Britain report proved to be a 'mixed bag'. Looking at some of the positive elements, by clarifying



who is to classify video games, setting clear dates for a digital radio switchover, and by outlining affirmative measures to tackle illegal file sharing, the Government has certainly taken steps in the right direction.

However, in many respects, Digital Britain did not go the distance and too many important issues remain unresolved. The issue of Channel 4's funding deficit has still not been cleared up, and nothing was said on governance of the BBC. It is my belief that an independent regulator is now a necessity.

With the BBC and public service broadcasting in mind, the proposed 'top-slicing' of the TV licence fee to fund other providers' regional news is the report's biggest flaw. To put it simply, taking money away from the BBC is a clear breach of the BBC's independence and, for a long time, I have been championing the establishment of a partnership fund as an alternative. Hopefully, now the Government will listen and allow the sensible proposals of assisted regional programming to be developed by

implementing such suggestions.

In relation to the future of education, living in a multimedia age presents new challenges but, more importantly, it presents great opportunities. Delivering my maiden parliamentary speech 17 years ago, I stated: 'Education is about more than economic prosperity. Education liberates while ignorance enslaves. Education widens horizons and enlarges choice. Education enables everyone, regardless of age, sex, background or ability, to realise their unique potential'.

Certainly these sentiments remain as true as ever. In the midst of a digital age, we should recognise that multimedia learning can be used to enhance education. However, we need to ensure that all, and not just the few, are given the opportunity to become media literate. Increasingly, modern employment demands a high level of ICT knowledge and, if we are not careful, we could increasingly see older generations left behind by the younger, media-savvy generation. Now,

more than ever, education should be made accessible to people of all ages.

Reaching adulthood should not be seen as a barrier to continued learning and we must work to ensure that both young and old are included in the media revolution. As a starting point, broadband rollout needs to be given a significant position at the forefront of digital policy. Overall, the proposals for broadband have a far greater reach than many people expected, but the Department for Culture, Media and Sport must accept that those in remote rural areas will be disappointed, as they will have to wait until at least 2017 before they get the benefits of super-fast broadband.

This rollout timetable is not adequate. The Government must implement a strategy that ensures our island truly becomes a 'digital Britain' in full and not just in parts.

Don Foster MP is Liberal Democrat Shadow Culture, Media and Sport Secretary



"The proposed 'top-slicing' of the TV licence fee to fund other providers' regional news is the report's biggest flaw"

With the digitisation of many of their collections, museums, libraries and archives can play an important role in supporting digital participation, says **Natasha Innocent**

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) believes its sector can play an important role in encouraging and supporting adult participation in the digital opportunities available now and in the future.

The digitisation of library, museum and archive collections has inspired people who might think it's not for them to get online. The BBC programme 'Who Do You Think You Are?' continues to encourage large numbers of older learners to do just that – motivated by the compelling urge to get their hands on the fascinating records available and then encouraged to develop their skills further and progress.

Public libraries, in particular, provide access to a wide range of digital resources and content, including national and local information and otherwise expensive reference materials. Through the People's Network, libraries offer an important safety net for those with no, or limited, access to the internet, while www.askalibrarian.org offers 24/7 support for anyone wanting to ask questions or carry out research from their own home.

The user demographic of public libraries has undoubtedly shifted since the People's Network was introduced eight years ago and there is no evidence of a slow-down in demand for either the free, or low-cost, internet access or the support offered to get online.

The next obvious step would be to provide a seamless lifelong learning network by hooking up the public library network to the national learning network, available in schools, and the JANET network, which connects education and research organisations.

There could also be an opportunity to build digital participation into the home library service network available in most local authorities. This is a highly valued bespoke book and chat service that supports isolated homebound people, many of whom are elderly. This existing, trusted community outreach programme could offer increased learning opportunities for people with limited mobility by opening up access to the internet. The mobile library fleet, particularly in rural areas, could play a similar role.

Public libraries could also have a further role to play in reducing the chances of 'conferring active disadvantage' on the digitally excluded. For instance, libraries could support the Government's Home Access scheme for low-income families (and a similar scheme being discussed for adults) by providing support from the local library to



develop the skills and confidence to get online and providing a troubleshooting service.

The MLA welcomes Baroness Morris's independent report on ICT-user skills – commissioned as part of the informal adult learning initiative that was kick-started by the *Learning Revolution* White Paper. The review recognises the importance of adults acquiring the digital skills essential if they are to take advantage of informal adult learning opportunities, reach their potential and play a full role in their communities – digital exclusion otherwise leads to further social exclusion.


The three-year national plan to improve digital participation is also welcomed by the MLA. We are a member of the consortium of stakeholders working to support greater digital participation and intend to map the current levels of support available from the public library network and the archive sector. With this information we can then establish a baseline of the current support for digital participation and consider how this might be extended.

Natasha Innocent is Senior Policy Adviser, Learning and Skills, at the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

The BBC's task is to move to the next stage in encouraging digital participation – by promoting new technologies and their benefits, and by working with other organisations to make it happen, writes **Wendy Jones**

A critical challenge identified by the Carter report is to enable everyone in the UK to share the benefits of a digital Britain. It's a tough call, familiar to many in education. In a mesmerizingly fast-moving environment, how do you avoid a deepening chasm between those who do and those who don't, won't or can't?

The ambition to make the digital franchise universal chimes with the BBC's Charter obligation to deliver to the public 'the benefit of emerging communications, technologies and services'. This covers many activities – from promoting digital switchover in broadcasting to supporting media literacy in



“This is a huge job and it will need the support of a wide range of organisations, working together for a common purpose, to bring it off”

all its aspects. Perhaps the most fundamental job is to provide content that people actually want to use – high-quality, imaginative, innovative, certainly, but content that talks to people’s interests and needs. The BBC was early to recognise the potential of the internet and now, more than a decade later, BBC Online is one of the most popular content-based websites in the UK. The broadcasting ecology is firmly ‘multi-platform’, online merges with TV and radio through developments such as iPlayer and podcasts, and attention now turns to the fuller digitisation of the broadcast archive.

In the midst of all this, it is worth remembering that education was a significant factor in the original approval granted to the BBC to start an online service. New technology was changing the way people could learn; interactivity and the opportunity for creative input offered something that television by itself could not. The BBC has increasingly switched its formal learning content online, as indeed has the Open University, which ended its overnight broadcasts for students nearly three years ago – although, of course, both still recognise TV’s motivational role. The relationship between ‘being digital’ and ‘learning’ is complex. In the early days when the BBC talked about

digital learning, we stressed that this was not about replacing teachers or tutors, but about complementing classroom learning with something more flexible. Hopefully this is now well understood but it is worth repeating.

Digital Britain’s concern is not, of course, with the pedagogy of e-learning. It is with ensuring that people have the skills to participate in the digital world. The BBC’s role here is significant and is threaded through activity over two decades: think of the BBC Micro in the 1980s, Computers Don’t Bite in the 1990s, WebWise, People’s War (which targeted an older audience) and, more recently, Raw, which positions computer skills alongside literacy and numeracy as an essential skill for life.

But, however compelling the content, the fact remains that 15 million people in the UK are missing out on something which the rest of us take for granted. Digital Britain is clear about the pervasiveness of digital culture. For the BBC the task now is to move to the next stage in encouraging digital participation – through new technologies (for some the draw may be mobile, for others internet via television), through promoting the benefits, and through finding new ways of working with other organisations to make it happen.

Wendy Jones is Head of Policy and Public Affairs, BBC Learning

The biggest challenge is matching the opportunities to inform and learn about digital technology with motivating people to take those opportunities, says Stewart Purvis

Jean’s on a journey. She didn’t want to go, but when her husband Bill died she had no choice.

When Bill was alive he was the technologist in the family. He liked to record family occasions on his video camera, one of the first to the market. Bill was an early adopter of the new technology, and Jean was happy to let him take the lead.

When Bill passed away two years ago Jean decided not to put the video camera back in its box for the last time, but to see if she could continue Bill’s legacy by finding out how the camera worked.

The man in the camera shop was only too pleased to show Jean the basics, and the journey began.

Two years later, Jean's well and truly digitally engaged. The video camera was just the start. A PC and broadband connection followed. Jean's now connected to her family across the country, booking flights with Ryanair to see her sister in Ireland and having a flutter on her favourite bingo website.

Jean's journey is far from unique, but for someone of her age it's not very common. Old habits and new tricks don't go well together and for many people 'of a certain age' who never worked with computers or left others to do it for them, the new digital world can be daunting and scary. The irony is that the opportunities the internet can bring are probably greater for those who have, so far, resisted being part of the digital world. About a third of adults in the UK don't use the internet. If we are to help those not yet digitally included we'll have to do something about it.

The biggest challenge we face is matching the opportunities to inform and learn about digital technology with motivating people to take those opportunities. Many of the 'final third' just don't understand what's in it for them, so why would they be bothered?

When the Government unveiled its plans for a digital Britain, it asked Ofcom to bring together a group of organisations to create a national plan to try to get the 'final third' fully connected. That was the good news; the bad news was that we had less than two months to come up with the plan.

We convened a working group, including government, industry and the third sector, to help pull the plan together. And at the end of March, we submitted the recommendations of the group to the Digital Britain team. In June, the Government's Digital Britain report announced that they liked our proposals and gave us the money to start to turn the plan into reality.

So what did the report say needed to be done to get the 'final third' to take their place in a digital Britain?

The heart of the challenge, we believed, lay not in the provision of support for people wanting to get involved. Indeed, NIACE, colleges, UK Online centres, libraries and the like have been offering a range of opportunities for people to build their skills and confidence in this area for years. The problem, as we saw it, was that research told us there was little appetite for this provision. Those who wanted to know more, and to take part, mostly asked friends and family for help, used trial and error or read the manual. And for many of the 'final third' it wasn't about providing support at all, it was about lack of interest.

We needed to inform and inspire people to consider what's available, how it might benefit them and then provide support for those who need it.

At the heart of our plan is the creation of a consortium of interested parties to promote what the Digital Britain report called 'digital participation'. By digital participation we

mean: '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.'

What we want to do is harness the considerable talents of the media to use their communication channels (broadcast, online and real-world) to inform and inspire people. And then let the providers in the community do their bit by offering a range of opportunities to help people build their skills, knowledge and understanding to become confident members of a digital Britain.

Over the summer, we've recruited a powerful consortium, including the BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky with their broadcast platforms; BT, Virgin Media, mobile and internet service and social network providers with their online resources; and outreach providers including NIACE and UK Online to help those who need it.

Our achievements will be measured by the increase in the number of households online, and the numbers using the internet outside the home; by the breadth of engagement with the technology, the ways and amount of use (communication, retail, content consumed, public services used); by the depth of people's engagement, such as their contributions, comments, joining networks, self-publishing and content creation; and, taken together, by the social and economic impact that results – in particular, the impact on economic recovery and benefits for disadvantaged groups and communities.

This is a huge job and it will need the support of a wide range of organisations, working together for a common purpose, to bring it off.

We want to use all the resources available to the consortium to inform and inspire people, to let them know what opportunities are available to them and to help them see how, by making their own digital journeys, they can, like Jean, benefit from what's on offer in a digital Britain.

Stewart Purvis is the Partner for Content and Standards at Ofcom, the communications and media regulator

It is people, not 'pipes', that will drive a digital Britain – investment in skills is at least as important as investment in infrastructure, says **Helen Milner**

In the wake of Digital Britain, the core challenge ahead lies not in the creation of infrastructures or content, but in winning over hearts and minds.

The immediate reaction from the media and the general public was certainly mixed, focused on the details of the £6 annual levy on landlines and the skimming of the BBC licence fee. For technical stakeholders it was

more a case of 2Mb or not 2Mb, and, for the digital inclusion and digital skills community, a rollercoaster of welcome recognition and frustrating lack of resource.

Clearly, there are hearts and minds out there yet to be won over by Lord Carter's vision. However, moving away from the detail and away from the converted digerati, it appears there is also a significant, and perhaps more difficult, job to be done to get some very key stakeholders on board with even the report's most basic principles.

Digital Britain's first sentence places it as central to plans for economic recovery. Yet only around half of MPs (46 per cent) and only one in three councillors (38 per cent) think digital investment will help the UK recover from the economic downturn. Similarly, at least a quarter of business leaders (27 per cent) actively disagree that 'digital' has any role to play in economic recovery.

The figures come from ComRes and ICM, and show that when it comes to digital inclusion there is still much confusion and misinformation. While most respondents had a fairly accurate understanding that disadvantaged groups were more likely to be excluded, the link between social exclusion and digital exclusion was not universally accepted. Only 60 per cent of MPs, 55 per cent of councillors and 55 per cent of business leaders believed the internet could help to level the playing field and bridge class divides. There were also many different ideas about what 'digital exclusion' actually meant. Interestingly, Labour MPs and councillors are most likely to see digital matters as key to economic recovery and recognise their social impact; Conservatives are most likely to disagree it has either an economic or a social role to play.

It's more bad news for digital inclusion, which very much took two steps forward and one step back in Digital Britain. It gained a dynamic 'champion' in Martha Lane Fox, but lost its minister in the reshuffle; achieved long lobbied-for attention but no hard and fast support. Now, without the buy-in of cross-party MPs, councillors and businesses – key to policy-making and grassroots practice – it could be in danger of falling by the way-side before it even gets its foot through the door.

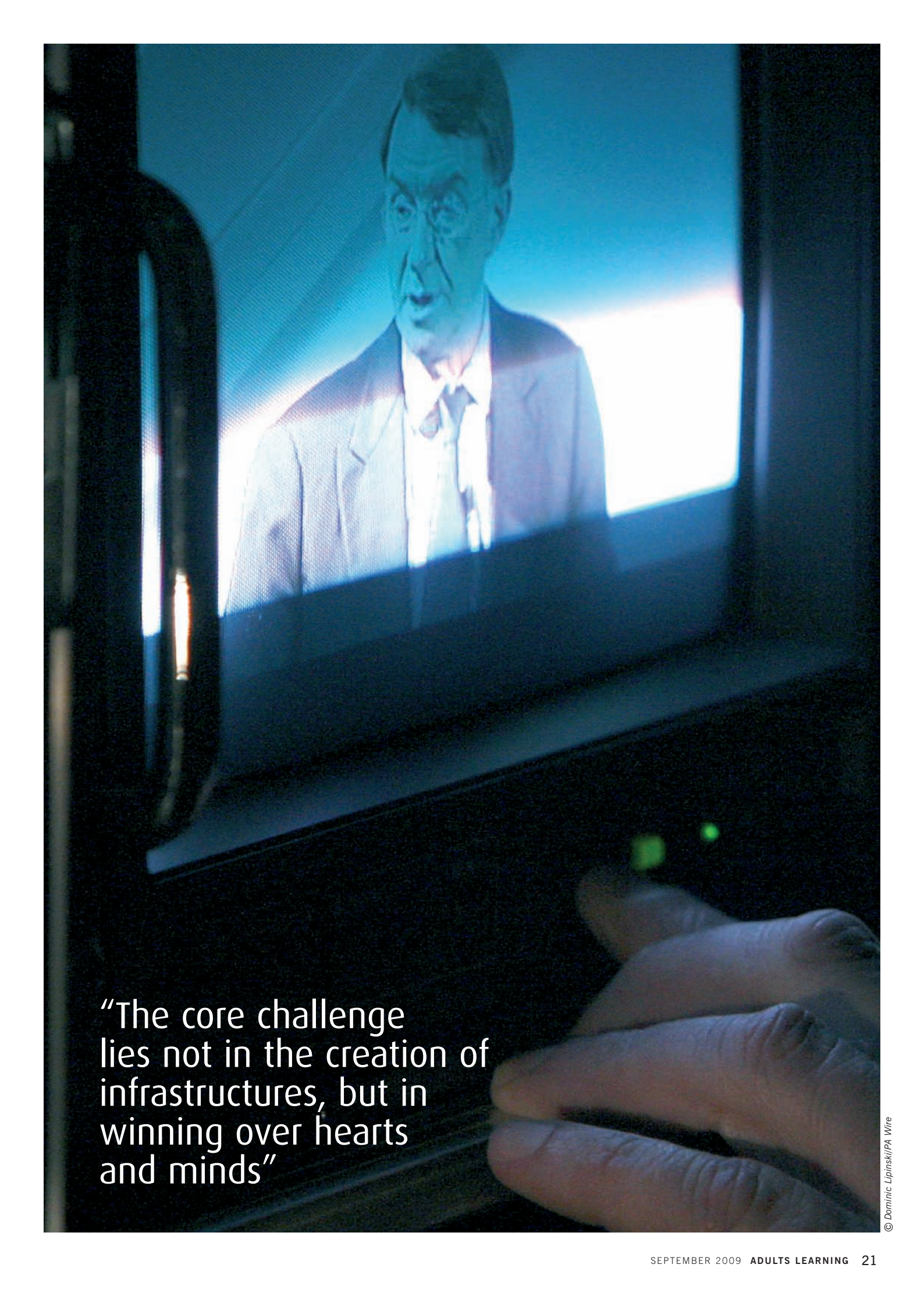
For my part, the evidence is clear. It is people and not pipes that will drive 'digital' Britain by their use of technology, and investment in their skills is equally, if not more, important than investment in infrastructures and content. That balance has to be redressed, and clearly articulated.

Engaging hearts and minds – from the public sector to the general public – remains perhaps the biggest 'digital' challenge of all.

Helen Milner is Managing Director, UK Online centres

HAVE YOUR SAY

Let us know your views by emailing:
comment@niace.org.uk



“The core challenge lies not in the creation of infrastructures, but in winning over hearts and minds”