



# Digital Britain Unconferences Summary Report

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26 May 2009

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## ***The Process***

The Digital Britain Unconferences were a series of UK-wide, volunteer-organised events quickly set up in reaction to the British Library hosted *Digital Britain Summit* on April 17th 2009. Their aim was to produce a representative 'grassroots response' to the interim report and gather set of positive, realistic contributions for consideration in the final report.

A week after the Summit, and with a nod from the Digital Britain team that they were listening, a website was launched with these simple instructions:

Anyone can attend or hold an event and associate it with Digital Britain Unconferences, you'll just need to summarise your discussions and hold it by 13th May 2009! Yes, time is very tight.

By the May 13th, twelve unconferences had taken place from Glasgow in the north to Truro in the south west. All attendees were encouraged to read the Interim Report and the level of engagement and serious thinking across each event was exemplary. The events included a virtual discussion focusing on rural issues related to Digital Britain and a family unconference held in Tutbury, Derbyshire, as well as large events of over 50 people in London and Manchester.

Such a speedy reaction was made possible by the free social media tools such as Yahoo Groups, Twitter, wikis, blogs and instant messaging. Few phone calls were made by the organisers. The process exemplifies what is possible for Digital Britain when these tools are combined with channelling existing loosely connected networks and motivations, and demonstrates the phenomenon described by Clay Shirky in his recent book *Here Comes Everybody* when he notes that 'when we change how we communicate, we change society'.

This report is based on the submissions received from the events held around the UK. Lightly edited versions of the full reports are also included for reference, and the original submissions are all available online via the *Digital Britain Unconference* website:  
<http://digitalbritainunconference.wordpress.com>

## ***Executive Summary***

### **More Ideas Than You Can Shake a Stick At**

Perhaps we should begin by noting that the unconferences provide an excellent demonstration of why traditional forms of consultation should no longer be seen as the only or optimal means of gathering responses to policy proposals of wide public concern.

The range of issues covered is unsurprising since 'Digital Britain' is really just 'Britain in a digital world', with all the richness, complexity and variety that implies.

As the reports came in it rapidly became clear that it would not be feasible to produce an authoritative but short narrative summary of such a disparate set of self-organising meetings, despite our promise to the Digital Britain team that we would keep our submission brief and to the point.

The 'unconference' ethos meant that each event was self-organising, varying from the open-ended conversation in Cambridge, through the decision to break into 'working groups' in London, but also including the videos made by the Fibre to the Home team and the Tutbury 'family unconference'.

Since the agenda for meetings was set by those attending based on our request that the discussion should focus on *positive and realistic contributions for consideration in the final report* we have used this criterion to select the main themes that we believe the Digital Britain team should pay attention to.

However we would like to stress again that this is our view having read through all the material, that the full reports are all available online, and that other summaries, perspectives and emphasises have been written-up elsewhere by other reputable agents.

Kathryn Corrick  
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Bill Thompson

### **Think Globally, Meet Local Needs**

The network is a utility, and recent developments are about the realisation of the network's inherent capability as a space for conversations between participants who will both send and receive information. The internet has always been two-way, now its most significant application, the World Wide Web, is also a read-write medium.

This poses significant challenges for all of us, and is driving massive technological, economic, social, political and cultural change. Digital Britain must be about all of these, and not just the economic aspects of the transformation taking place; it must take account of the needs of individuals, families, rural communities and small businesses and not just large corporations, central government and the major media players; it must show ambition and articulate a vision of a network future that we can believe in, one that is not based around a centralised and managerial agenda that is rapidly becoming obsolete.

### **Infrastructure**

Getting the infrastructure right is a necessary but not sufficient condition for progress. Without fast, reliable and universally available access to an IP network then nothing else is possible and the potential we all see in the internet will not be achieved. The past is not a good guide here, especially when it comes to the take-up of services, as network effects and unpredictable thresholds come into play again and again.

There was a general feeling that the interim report's aspiration to offer universal 2mbps access by 2012 lacked ambition and that while universal access was vital it should be based on significantly faster network speeds.

It may be useful to consider the situation in Cornwall, which has been able to benefit from EU convergence funds for the county-wide rollout of first-generation broadband. The ActNow project has ensured that 10,000 businesses and 99% of people in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly now enjoy broadband download speeds of up to 8Mb/s

This has allowed innovative businesses to be set up all over the county, giving a much-needed boost to the rural economy, reducing carbon footprint, employing people locally and enabling traditional and new industries alike to find customers across the country and across the world via the internet. ActNow says that "over 80% of businesses in Cornwall say that the Internet is now critical to their business."

This shows how near-universal access to the latest broadband technology can regenerate and revitalise not just urban areas but an entire county, yet the 'vision' outlined in the Digital Britain Interim Report will actually set Cornwall \*back\* to where it was in 2002.

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Businesses currently based in rural areas would be forced to relocate to urban areas served by NGA networks. This would put pressure on roads and transport networks, cause currently-vibrant small towns and villages to stagnate, and have a detrimental impact on the environment by increasing commuting.

The architecture of the network was also felt to be important. Experience teaches us that an effective network should adhere to the end-to-end principle and route the traffic sent over it as efficiently and effectively as possible rather than offering different levels of service, so network neutrality is an important principle.

Most consumer connections to the Internet are asymmetric, with download speeds some multiple of upload speeds. In Digital Britain creative individuals and organisations will benefit more from symmetric networks. Any universal service obligation should at least cover the issue of upload speeds, even if equality cannot be mandated.

In order to support this it may be necessary to bring the voluntary code on broadband speed under Ofcom's statutory control so that ISPs are more likely to deliver on their promises. It may also be appropriate to have the Office of Fair Trading or Local Authority Trading Standards offices monitor broadband speeds.

Britain would benefit from the digital equivalent of the London Eye or Buckingham Palace, pieces of 'digital architecture.' For example a National geospatial backbone project to offer mapping data and services might inspire entrepreneurship and creativity.

### Universality and Inclusion

It was widely argued that there needs to be much more focus in the final report in supporting and inspiring the people who can get online but who choose not to do. The issue concerns people, not just infrastructure. Digital Britain needs to be far more ambitious about digital inclusion, perhaps setting a bold target of getting 3m more people online within a reasonable timeframe.

An entitlement to basic digital skills should be included in the final report, but strategies often focus on the people at the bottom (with no skills) or the people at the top (with the highest skills). The report should instead focus on a continuum of digital skills that can inspire and involve all citizens.

This *continuum* model is as much about role models, sharing creativity and innovation, and business creation as much as skills. The final report should ensure that there is an understanding of this throughout Government, throughout all education institutions, and throughout all employers and employer support agencies.

Parity for urban and rural communities in connectivity should be a core principle and not simply an aspiration. Bold targets should be set for access and also for digital inclusion, with digital skills and access to the internet seen as entitlements for all.

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One model for this might be to offer families with low income a free "personal data allowance" perhaps a free data stick with 3GB per month, or 10GB pm via their phone line or a mobile internet connection.

Wireless backhaul should be considered more seriously as a solution for areas where wired infrastructure is hard to deliver. This would deliver a symmetric connection to users, while the options for increasing the backhaul are open to competition and technology neutral.

### **Education, Skills and Economic Development**

More recognition should be given to the potential of connectivity for new forms of co-creativity.

We will all soon be content creators as well as content consumers, and attention should be given to how to promote the creativity of individuals, small businesses and people working from home

Birmingham offers a good example of how things change when there is public support for creative, cultural and digital businesses, which in turn attracts further investment from the private sector

Education has a cultural role for digital media and citizenship, but we need to move the debate beyond business and technology. While media literacy is taught in school the current ICT curriculum in England and Wales does not go far enough to prepare children for the digital age.

We should actively promote a culture of experimental enterprise. Learn from Silicon Valley, rather than lament it. Ideas for supporting digital businesses include:

- Start a government-funded Graduate Digital Apprenticeship Scheme to encourage graduates to apply for apprenticeships in digitally engaged businesses.

- Set up an Enterprise Bank for long term success in ideas rather than short term return to shareholder.

- Establish an Innovator Loan Scheme

More also needs to be done to encourage an active digital community outside the 'digital sector.' For example, public service engagement should be digital by default, while BBC content should be more easily available for people to reuse or adapt.

Privacy is a major issue, and one that requires more attention. Education in privacy risks is vital, as is a strengthened legal and regulatory framework for data protection.

## **Content and IP**

A commitment to alternative models of IP

Copyright needs a rethink, in rebalancing complete control and public interest. The 'public domain' should be explicitly supported, and publicly funded material should be in the public domain rather than protected by Crown Copyright or Parliamentary Copyright.

The government should commit to opening up information and letting third parties utilise it, as access to data encourages innovation and creativity.

It is important to recognise that consumers don't always want to download content illegally, but often have no option as commercial offerings don't reflect what consumers would like to watch/listen to.

The government should uphold the law on the uploaders of illegal content, not the downloaders.

While industry has to make it a lot easier for consumers to get what we want when they want it and to pay for it at the point they want it, regulation should not simply reflect the demands of the content providers. For example, it may be appropriate to target those who upload material without permission rather than downloaders.

## **The Old Order**

Government should be more visionary in encouraging new players to grow and generate new economic activity. Reviewing and regenerating the legacy players is not enough. Defining 'public service broadcasting' is complex, but should allow for incubating new forms of content, new producers and new forms of consumption.

'Community TV' and 'Community Radio' are analogue terms. Support communities that publish their own news and information, regardless of medium, and support training them to do so.

## Appendix: Authors

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This report has been collated from the individual submissions from each event, edited and summarised by

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We would like to thank all of those who took part for permission to use their reports.

Birmingham: Jon Hickman

Cambridge: Richard G Elen

Didcot: Cameron Neylon and Lilly Evans

Glasgow: Craig McGill

Leeds: John Popham

London: Mike Kiely, Andrew Wise, Helen Milner, Andy Gibson, Vinay Gupta, Brian Condon, Bill Thompson, Jim Killock, William Perrin, Ellie Louis

Manchester: Shaun Fenson

Nottingham: Susi O'Neill

Truro: Fiona Campbell-Howes

Tutbury: Sue Greenwood and family

Rural: Christine Doyle

We would also like to thank all those who attended, took part and supported this project, without whom the unconferences would have been impossible.

<http://digitalbritainunconference.wordpress.com>