

DEBATE SUMMARY

Digital participation: how can digital access be made available to everyone?

Held at The Royal Society of Edinburgh on 31st October, 2013.

The Foundation is grateful to The Royal Society of Edinburgh for supporting this debate.

The hash tag for this debate is #fstdigitalparticipation .

Chair: **The Earl of Selborne GBE FRS**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: **Professor Alan Alexander OBE FRSE**
Deputy Chair, The Royal Society of Edinburgh Inquiry into Digital Participation
Lorraine McMillan
Chief Executive, East Renfrewshire Council
Dr Alan Blackwell
Reader in Interdisciplinary Design, Computer Laboratory,
University of Cambridge

SIR JOHN ARBUTHNOTT, President of the RSE, in his welcome said that two years ago the RSE had reported on the digital infrastructure in Scotland. But digital access was as important as digital infrastructure, and the RSE had instituted the present inquiry to ensure that everyone in Scotland would be enabled to use, and benefit from, digital access.

PROFESSOR ALEXANDER explained the makeup of the Committee; its modus operandi, and timetable. There had been extensive consultation and research; an interim report would be issued on 4 December, and a final report in early March. But the conclusions and recommendations of the inquiry were still open for comment, revision and expansion. He hoped there would be valuable comments from this discussion.

While the digital infrastructure was much improved, there were still areas without it; more worrying, even where broadband was available, it was not being used. There were various reasons: lack of technical skills; concern about costs; fear of risk and lack of motivation. The inquiry had targeted particular groups - the disabled, those excluded by poverty, and the aged.

Evidence showed that non-participation was particularly marked amongst those suffering from multi disability, the poor (non-

participation mapped strongly onto areas of deprivation), and those running small businesses. There were lessons for the public sector, business organizations, and the voluntary sector. Prime targets should be building motivation to participate; reducing fears of intrusion and lack of privacy and worry about cost. These issues stemmed from lack of trust and failure to understand the benefits. "What is in it for me?" is a common reaction.

All sectors would benefit from more participation - the public sector could reduce costs, businesses - particularly those in marginal areas - would perform better, and the disabled could be helped. Above all, connecting people increased social cohesion and reduced exclusion. Emerging conclusions were:

1. Increased participation was essential and needed coordinated effort and strong leadership;
2. Lack of motivation must be tackled through better understanding of individuals' concerns;
3. Much more use should be made of public facilities for WIFI connection and use (why not make school computers available to the public?);
4. Education in digital matters in schools was not adequate, and a joined up approach was needed for training;

5. Trust could be built by peer support and a community approach.

MS McMILLAN shared Professor Alexander's view of the importance of digital participation, and the vital role the public sector had in increasing it, both to reduce costs and improve services. The Local Government Information Technology Board aimed to help the process. It had on it local government and Scottish government officials and businessmen.

The public sector faced not only stringent financial controls, but also increased public expectation of what on line services should deliver and an aging population with increased need for services.

Individual authorities had different needs and problems, but there was an overall determination to improve, which should be underpinned by universities training staff and developing technology at the leading edge.

The Scottish Government must be a leader. All schools now had computers and staff trained to teach their use. Costs for individuals could be reduced by making better use of public facilities and developing free Wi-Fi zones. One should not assume that the disabled are automatically excluded - they can benefit (for example from ebooks) and with tablets and computers that are easy to use and do not break easily.

Above all connecting people reduced isolation and improved community life - but we must be careful to ensure that increased participation did not, in some cases, result in exclusion for others.

DR BLACKWELL considered different aspects of the benefits of digital participation. First, it enabled service providers to understand much more effectively if, and how, their services were being used; second, it enabled participants to inform each other, and their governments - local or national - of their concerns and wishes, in a way which aggregating big data did not; third, it enabled people to act as individuals, and released their own creativity, rather than having it imposed by big corporate providers.

For the first, he cited the child vaccination programme - UNICEF thought 100m children had been vaccinated, but they do not really know - they have no feedback from individuals. They cannot map their coverage

with specific data which links, for example, deprivation and poverty with services (see for example the Glasgow survey of disability and poverty¹). The second is an important element if we wish to increase "deliberative democracy" - i.e. decisions which follow the wishes of unconstrained individuals responding to dynamically changing circumstances.

We underestimate the frustration people feel if they think their wishes are being ignored or not heard; a major reason for political apathy. The strength and variety of individual views are not captured by statistical analysis.

He cited India as an example of his third point - self realization and creativity. Here villagers are using the tree-hung speakers of radio stations to create programmes and videos of their own, so that they can capture the life and circumstances of their own village, and make it available to others. They can show themselves as they really are - not as others might wish to see them, nor as big organizations might wish to portray them.

This could be done here - but creativity is always at risk from corporate constraints, such as IP rights of major corporates.

In the ensuing discussion, speakers questioned the ability of the public sector to understand the problems of the disabled in using online services. There was a lack of coordination - one might start off online, but then found there were complex forms to fill in, or that a visit had to be made to an office to verify identity.

Best procedure was not always followed. It would help if language supported pictures, and there was scope for voluntary bodies to explore alternative ways in which particular groups of disabled could follow alternative paths to enable them to use online services.

Simpler technology was essential - instructions that could be read, or understood. Local authorities needed to be much more imaginative in the use of public space for online purposes; they were too optimistic about the spread of digital teaching in schools.

1

There was some excellent teaching, but the use by children of computers was often more sophisticated than teachers understood - and in some schools the equipment was outdated. Good practice needed to be shared to ensure that best practice was understood and implemented throughout Scotland.

An overall director for digital education for all schools should be considered. Professor Alexander had suggested that school online equipment should be available for public use. No doubt there could be contractual and safety problems, but these were the sort of issues which imaginative planning could overcome.

Speakers shared the presenters' emphasis on the importance of full digital participation for connecting people, bringing people together, creating communities and reducing isolation and exclusion.

Trust grew if people worked together; their fears of risk were reduced. If your neighbour was doing something and was helping you to do it, motivation was much stronger. Isolation was often felt by the disabled - an individual could feel that he was the only person who suffered the disability and did not know how to cope. To create a "community" of fellow sufferers would be of real value.

The development of online communities could also, as Dr. Blackwall had suggested, affect the relationship of individuals to government. Special interest groups would have to ensure that they were not representing the views of only a minority; those who would not otherwise object to a policy, would find it easier to express their doubts.

No doubt a rolling referendum on policies would be problematical. It was an open question whether democracy would suffer or benefit from universal digital participation.

Questions of cost had not been adequately addressed. While the average household expenditure on communication was estimated at £100 - and therefore everyone could afford a little more for broadband - the funds available per household in deprived areas was around £25 - which meant any extra cost could be unsustainable.

There was scope for making tablets cheaper - Tesco offered one for £100. The public sector should be driving prices down. This

was not just a problem for the deprived; it was also a problem for marginal SMEs with small profits, who could not risk expenditure without seeing a quick return. They had to avoid risk at all costs.

But if they did not, they would fail; importantly these were often businesses in villages which, if they went, the community would fail as well. Remote areas, and marginal craft industries would be particularly vulnerable. The scale of the increase in participation needed to meet the report's objectives had not been understood. It was equivalent to the revolution in transport and industrialization 150 years ago. Providing the hardware in those circumstances was not enough; workers and industrialists had to learn new techniques to make good use of the opportunities this revolution offered.

Speakers were also concerned with the assumption that digital participation would be the answer to all problems and that it would work satisfactorily to promote inclusion.

But we must not underestimate the dangers of exclusion, and recognize the importance many attach to other forms of communication such as face to face conversations. There will always be those who cannot, or will not, use online devices and - for mental or cultural reasons - do not wish to be part of a community, or learn to change their lifestyles.

Professor Alexander had hoped that the meeting would provide useful points about the merging conclusions of the report. In summary, the principal points made during the discussion were:

1. Digital participation was vital; the report was targeting the important areas. Government, industry and the voluntary sector all had a role to play. Effort needed to be more coordinated;
2. The public sector still had to realize the scale of the challenge; to make greater use of public facilities for internet use; and improve digital education in schools;
3. SMEs failure to participate would mean the loss of marginal industries in marginal areas, with loss of population, local skills and community. Business leaders must work harder to stress the benefits of online access, and reduce the fear of risk;

4. Cost was a major problem if deprived areas were to increase participation. Software costs must be better understood and free WIFI areas promoted;

considered in sufficient detail. There were many different theories for lack of motivation.

5. In all areas lack of motivation was poorly understood, because it had not been

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield KCB

TED Talk:

TED Ideas Worth Spreading

www.ted.com/talks/rebecca_mackinnon_let_s_take_back_the_internet.html

Links:

Carnegie UK Trust

www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2013/across-the-divide---full-report

Culture, Communication and Change: Summary of an investigation of the use and impact of modern media and technology in our lives

www-edc.eng.cam.ac.uk/~akm51/PD_Final_Reports/short_report_final_23.06.11.pdf

Computer Laboratory, University of Cambridge

www.cl.cam.ac.uk

East Renfrewshire Council

www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

Edinburgh Social Care and Services

www.edinburgh.gov.uk/info/1347

The Foundation for Science and Technology

www.foundation.org.uk

Glasgow City Social Services

www.glasgow.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5046

Go On UK

www.go-on.co.uk/news-and-views/latest-thinking/

Government on the internet: progress in delivering information and services online

www.nao.org.uk/report/government-on-the-internet-progress-in-delivering-information-and-services-online/

Department for Business, Innovation & Skills

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-innovation-skills

Information Economy Strategy

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206944/13-901-information-economy-strategy.pdf

OECD

www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/workingpaper/5kg0lk60rr30-en

Research Council UK (RCUK)

www.rcuk.ac.uk

The Royal Society of Edinburgh Digital Participation Inquiry
www.scotlandis.com/news/stories/rse-launch-digital-participation-inquiry

Science Direct
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304422X06000167

The Scottish Government
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Economy/digital/digitalparticipation

Scottish Local Government ICT Strategy
www.lgictstrategy.org.uk

Yale University
www.econ.yale.edu/growth_pdf/cdp881.pdf

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