



Anna Bradley's speech at the Inside Government Event:

Delivering Digital Inclusion: Tackling Social Exclusion Through Technology

9th December 2009

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to speak today.

For those of you who don't know, the Communications Consumer Panel is a panel of independent experts appointed under the Communications Act to advise Ofcom, Government and industry on what is in the interests of citizens, consumers and small businesses in the communications sector.

Our remit includes a particular focus on disadvantaged groups, including those on low incomes and those with disabilities, so we are very concerned that these groups have the opportunity to benefit from, and are not disadvantaged by, developments in the communications sector. Unsurprisingly then the Panel has a long track record of working on issues related to digital inclusion and digital participation.

I am also a member of the Digital Inclusion Task Force: a group of independent experts appointed by Government to provide advice and support to Martha Lane Fox, the Champion for Digital Inclusion.

My presentation today will draw on my experiences in both of these roles. In particular, I would like to talk about:

- The growing importance of, and focus on, digital participation
- The importance of starting with the experiences and needs of consumers and citizens and the framework for digital inclusion and participation that the Panel is developing, which does just that.
- The link between improving online public services and promoting digital inclusion by providing a motivation for getting on line; and
- Implementing, and ensuring the ongoing relevance of, the universal broadband commitment

The importance of digital participation

This event is very timely; Panel research carried out last year showed that people across the UK believe that access to the internet is at a tipping point. It is moving from being a 'nice to have' to a 'must have'. Indeed, the Panel's research shows that most people with broadband at home already feel that they could not be without it, and that they value it more highly than their mobile phone, land line or digital TV.

The majority of people also believe that soon it will be essential for everyone to have broadband at home, and that for some groups it is already essential, in particular: people with school-age children and those who are physically isolated.

In the future, people who do not have broadband access are expected to be at a significant disadvantage. There is an expectation that in the future more, and more vital, services will be delivered solely online, or be provided offline in a way that penalises users, perhaps there will be a higher cost or lower quality. It is anticipated that people will miss out on a wide range of services including: shopping, banking, school work, public services, and TV and other content.

Research by PWC, commissioned by Martha Lane Fox and her team, shows that there are real benefits to be gained, if we can persuade those who aren't currently online to take up and use the internet.

There are benefits for the individual – for instance, PWC estimate people save an average of £560 a year by shopping and paying bills online and that people with basic IT skills earn up to 10% more than their offline counterparts.

There are also benefits to society. The PWC report estimates that the potential economic benefits of bringing all those who are currently digitally excluded online is in excess of £22 billion, brought about through a mixture of improved education and employment outcomes; improved health and well being outcomes; efficiency savings for public service providers; plus potential benefits for consumers able to purchase a wider range of products at lower prices.

The Prime Minister's speech on Smarter Government on Monday, in which he set out the Government's aim to shift the great majority of our large transactional services online within the next five years, is to be welcomed. As is his accompanying announcement of £30 million of further funding for UK Online Centres. This puts some flesh on the bones of the commitment to public service switchover that was set out in the Digital Britain report, and recognises what the public have said to us about the importance of making sure everyone, including the most socially excluded, has the opportunity and the support they need to get online.

But of course, this is only part of what needs to be done. We also need to do more to deliver the skills and knowledge agenda for those who are not socially excluded, provide support for deepening engagement for those already on line, and provide the motivation for

people to want to get online. This means that we need to make sure that all of those who are not online understand what the internet has to offer and how that offer is relevant to their own lives, potentially through some sort of social marketing campaign. So, the announcement is a very welcome start, but there is still a lot to play for if the digital participation brief is to be fulfilled.

The Panel's digital participation framework

The Panel is very focused on working to ensure that people have the help and support they need across the digital participation spectrum. We contributed to the development of the Digital Britain white paper, stressing the importance of understanding digital participation from the perspective of citizens and consumers. Our contribution was based on extensive original research by the Panel that injected the citizen and consumer perspective directly into the policy making process.

Building on this work, the Panel has begun to develop a 'digital participation framework'. The framework is based on a review of the available evidence, and sets out the range of things that different people need to get online and make the most out of the internet.

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It is still work in progress, but we think it is a useful way of understanding all the different elements that need to be in place if people are really to get the benefits that the online world can offer.

These 'demand-side' issues have not generally been thought about in a holistic way, and rarely, if ever, from the consumer and citizen perspective. People tend to come at demand-side issues from different, usually partial perspectives and with prior agendas. For instance a concern about illegal file sharing, or child safety, or media literacy or some aspect of consumer protection. These are all relevant concerns, but they result in a piecemeal approach that leaves important things out.

We think the framework is a useful way of bringing all the different elements together, starting with the views and experiences of people themselves. We have used consumer research to develop the framework and we will be conducting our own, additional research to find out whether people recognise the different elements, whether they identify any gaps, which elements they think are most important, and how the elements fit together, as people take their individual journeys towards digital participation.

We also think the framework is a useful way of illustrating the different needs of different groups and so targeting our efforts in ways that will most help those groups of people. The research shows there are clear differences in the attitudes and experiences of different socio-demographic groups, and we have mapped this information against the framework to illustrate the areas where those groups are most likely to need support.

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The starkest difference is a generational one. The highlighted boxes in this slide are the areas where, in the research, older people say they lack confidence or require support. The boxes with dotted lines are areas where we have not yet found enough evidence to judge either way.

As we might expect, older people (especially those over 75) are:

- less likely to feel confident, and therefore
- more likely to need help and support, across almost all areas of our framework.

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In contrast, the majority of young people can:

- see the benefits of the internet and
- are confident in their ability to set up and use the equipment.
- But they are not so good at managing the risks:

Younger people are, for instance:

- less likely to make a judgement about a website before entering personal details;
- less likely to rate themselves as informed, knowledgeable or confident about using their consumer rights;
- the least aware of sources of funding; and
- least able to describe the regulatory status of online content.

Motivation and the role of online public services

I'd now like to spend a bit of time talking about the left hand side of the framework – the importance of 'getting interested'. If we are to persuade more people to get online, we will have to convince them that the benefits are worth the effort of overcoming what are often considerable barriers.

Explaining the benefits in generic terms will not be enough. Research has found that many of those who are not online can already identify many of the same benefits as those who are online. However, this awareness does not translate into a sufficiently powerful reason to use the internet.

Many of the people who are not online – older people and people on low incomes – are very heavy users of public services. Indeed, most of us are and the appetite for online services like vehicle licensing shows the potential demand.

Better, more interactive public services online could give more people a reason to get online. By showing people how to claim benefits, get health advice or study for a qualification, we can increase people's skills and understanding and increase broadband penetration. As well as making savings for taxpayers.

At the moment, the online public services offer is limited. Only the DVLA and NHS Direct offer any truly interactive services. The rest are information-based. More services will be going online; on Monday the Prime Minister highlighted student loans, jobseekers allowance, working tax credits and child benefit as some of the first candidates.

But to really act as a driver to internet adoption, the services we choose to put online need to be those that matter most to people, not just those that will achieve the biggest cost savings. And then those services will need to be designed around the needs of those service users. On-line welfare and benefit services could provide a huge win for many of those consumers who are both socially and digitally excluded.

Even where these people don't have access, on-line services would allow those at Citizen's Advice and elsewhere, to help more people, more efficiently and at the same time help those people to become more digitally engaged.

New on-line services also need to be designed with an eye on the future and take advantage of emerging technological possibilities. More advanced telemedicine services offer even more potential benefits for service users and taxpayers. We can't underestimate the organisational change that public services like the NHS will need to undergo, but the benefits could be huge, particularly for the growing proportion of older people in our society, many of whom are physically isolated.

Of course, we must switch off the off-line public services with caution to ensure that the most vulnerable can still access the services they need. But, if we can get the online public services right these vulnerable people, the heaviest users of public services, are exactly the ones who might benefit most.

The universal broadband commitment

Finally, I want to say a word about the infrastructure. The increasing importance of broadband underlines the need for it to be universally available throughout the UK at an adequate minimum speed. The Panel therefore welcomes the Government's universal broadband commitment.

The key test for the success of the commitment is whether people everywhere in the UK will be able to use the online services and carry out the activities that they value in a reliable and consistent way. The Panel's research shows that 2Mb/s is enough to support those activities and services that people value and are using at the moment but the key task will be to ensure that a 2Mb/s universal service does not become outmoded.

This is particularly important in the context of the Government's commitment to make public services available online. For instance, while 2Mb/s is fast enough for those services on which people currently place most value, it will not support truly interactive services such as telemedicine that require fast upload as well as download speeds.

The Government's plan to stimulate the rollout of next-generation super-fast broadband would mean that the universal service does not become outmoded. In this brave new world we could all look forward to much faster access in a relatively short space of time.

Faster speeds, beyond 2Mb/s, will be needed if Gordon Brown's vision for online public services is to become a reality. So, if superfast broadband doesn't go ahead, we will need a contingency plan; the planned 2Mb/s universal service will have to be procured and delivered in a way that enables the level of service to be reviewed and increased easily and efficiently when this proves necessary – that time will be sooner than we all think!

The review of the universal service commitment should include a consumer test to ensure that the level of service does not become too far out of line with the average speed and enables everyone to use the services and carry out the activities that consumers in general believe are necessary to participate fully in society.

Summary

In conclusion then, the stakes for delivering digital inclusion are high and getting higher. It will not be easy to achieve.

However, the opportunities are there to be grasped:

- We have a new Champion for Digital Inclusion,
- a Digital Participation Consortium, and
- a government commitment to deliver broadband to everyone at, at least for now, an adequate minimum speed.

If we can make sure the needs and perspective of citizens and consumers are at the heart of all of this activity then I believe we stand a real chance of delivering digital inclusion in the UK.