

YouTube, Disruption and Being Human

I recently attended my daughter's P4 show at school. Part of this included a video on what they wanted to be when they grew up. Over half of them want to be YouTubers. This was news to me. Google revealed that the top YouTubers have up to 70m subscribers, 19bn views and can earn up to £14m annually. I feel far removed from this world.

We live in a rapidly changing world which present new economic and well-being opportunities. Yet, we have a productivity issue, businesses have a relatively low adoption rate of digital and digital participation remains a challenge. Getting the foundations of infrastructure, applications and skills right will help to meet some of these challenges.

We can work from anywhere, challenging the need for bricks and mortar offices. Shared and automated transport may signal the end of private car ownership and question why we need to drive at all. Retail is struggling to compete in an online world, disrupting the traditional concept of a high street. TV consumption will never be the same and increasingly learning is delivered virtually or online. You can get anything delivered to your house and sometimes - without knowing it - we are interacting with robots on a daily basis.

The UK regularly features in the top ten digital 'savvy' country lists. Despite this, the UK has a productivity issue, ranking lower than most of our G7 partners. Our small businesses are lagging in digital adoption, with only 20% having a digital 'back office' compared with Germany's 40%. According to the UK Consumer Digital Index 2018, 11.3m people in the UK do not have the five basic digital skills. Around 3.5m people with a registered disability aren't online; 5.5m of those over 60 years old aren't online; 1.2m people claiming benefits have low or no digital capability.

While access and affordability may have a role, they aren't the only factors. For

39% of those offline, the main barrier is a lack of interest. 17% believe the internet is too complicated. When asked what might get them online, 78% of those offline said 'nothing'.

Technology has massive potential for some of the most vulnerable people in society. It can create new channels to communicate, help us to manage our health, find new opportunities, start and grow businesses, be more mobile, manage our finances, reduce bills, seek advice and create wider personal networks. Moreover, it has never been easier for businesses to exploit the digital world. Cloud, low code applications, social media, messaging, productivity tools, open data and do-it-yourself websites have made new services and markets more accessible.

There is no shortage of cross-sector organisations addressing these issues. Government is also providing strategic leadership. Scotland's digital strategy, *Realising Scotland's full potential in a digital world, a digital strategy for Scotland*, is particularly strong on digital participation and stimulating the economy.

The question is whether we are addressing the foundations quickly enough, at scale and inclusively. By foundations I mean infrastructure, platforms and capabilities. Investment in digital infrastructure, should be considered on equal footing to roads, bridges, railways and buildings. Like any transport system this need be ubiquitous, affordable, integrated and flexible. Moreover these networks will need to have security built in, be cloud-ready and capable of meeting massive increases in data.

Another foundation is providing the basis from which to generate more digital services, more quickly and at lower costs by sharing investment and capabilities. An area in which the UK is recognised as a world leader is the government as a platform. This concept is based on a common core

infrastructure of shared digital systems, technology and processes upon which it's easy to build digital services. Yet this remains largely a construct built within and for central government. Some local governments are expanding this concept to support all sectors, including small businesses and communities. This could be accelerated as a pan-sector collaboration and may change government's role to more of a curator, rather than a service provider, supporting wider outcomes, driving economic growth and making digital services more relevant to specific needs.

The final foundation is capability. While there is a lot of activity in this area, from basic to high end digital skills, it is often viewed as an addition rather integrated into everything we do. More importantly, how do we get people motivated to go online. The internet can do more than make it easier to buy things, get information or consume services. It can help with broader wellbeing, allow us to communicate easier and be more financially secure. A diverse range of people need to design and communicate the benefits of these services. It requires people with empathy, judgement and creativity. In other words, human beings and not machines.



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