

Jeremy Hunt previews Tory view of Digital Britain

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Jeremy Hunt MP came hotfoot (and late) out of a Shadow Cabinet meeting to tell a Polis audience how he would be responding to today's Queen Speech if it included a Digital Communications Bill. His talk was remarkably open and direct for someone who might be merely months away from a seat at the real Cabinet table. [Watch an edited film report of the event [here](#)]

It seemed to me that he is prepared to make tough choices and that he does have a guiding principle but inevitably there is a lot of detail to be filled in.

Take the idea of universal access to high-speed broadband. You wouldn't expect a Conservative not to prioritise rural areas but that is exactly what he did. He was clear that the important thing was to get high speed lines working in the urban areas where the creative industries are largely located as well as the main mass of the population. There's no point, he said, spending millions on wiring up a remote village if it detracts from investing in the core centres.

Hunt's guiding principle was to avoid regulation. This is not the same as the free-market economics of the 1980s. So he recognises the role of regulating for intellectual property, for example. But generally, he wants to remove obstacles such as ownership rules that prevent business converging in parallel with the technology.

Nor does he want to get rid of quangos such as Ofcom. As he recognised, Ofcom probably has more research expertise than Whitehall. But he does want its role reduced to oversight while Ministers take the lead on policy.

And that lead will include forcing companies like BT to open up their 'digital ducts' for competitors to use to pipe their product to the public, too.

Hunt obviously has a feel for digital communications but I am still not entirely convinced by it all. Will local TV really take off in the UK in the way it has in the US? Will the affiliate system work for Birmingham West Midlands as well as it does for Birmingham Alabama? But at least he is pushing new ideas.

Sacha Deshmukh from Mandate Communications was the nearest to a digital visionary on the panel. He pointed out just how far Britain is behind countries like Korea where a superfast broadband economy with proper infrastructure is a reality now.

As he pointed out, that creates the market for digital content to boom. It also facilitates the public themselves to work alongside the professionals to create content and participate in the digital market.

Peter Bazalgette was also concerned about where the investment for content rather than infrastructure was going to come from. He showed how spending on new material is dropping in the UK amongst the digital industries and the danger is that we will fall behind in what is now an entirely global market.

But it was left to Prof. Robin Mansell from LSE Media and Communications to remind the panel and the politician about the people who pay in the end. What about the digital citizen as well as the digital consumer? How are we going to provide the public with the creative skills and access to make sure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities on offer?

Next year Polis will be launching a series of seminars on digital communications – get it touch with us if you want to be part of it via polis@lse.ac.uk

And thanks to Mandate Communications who sponsored the reception. <http://www.yourmandate.com/>

A good report of this event by the Media Blog [here](#)

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