

Internet? No thanks (Ed Richards at Polis)

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New [Ofcom research](#) shows that of the people who are still not signed up to the Internet, 55% say that it is simply because they don't want it. They can afford it, they know about it and it is accessible to where they live. But they can live their lives without it. So, a case of "Internet? No thanks".

This was one of the more interesting facts in a densely argued [speech by Ofcom's Ed Richards](#), who sought to chart a way for telecoms through the stormy economic weather. He attempted to salvage the idea that competition and the market can still deliver the massive infrastructural investment needed to build a universal superfast broadband network.

The common thread here is the question of how far in the coming years the market will deploy the new networks and services – and how far is far enough, as these services are also increasingly seen as part of the essential infrastructure for the economy and of our lives in the future.

He acknowledged that to make it truly fast and absolutely comprehensive might need some form of state intervention. Although he insisted that Ofcom's task is to provide a regulatory framework, not to oversee every aspect of delivery:

Competitive constraints in turn mean that we can actually in some areas de-regulate – something of a heretical notion in the present climate, but still worth striving for where it can be done in a way which is consistent with the public interest. Key to the benefits of better prices, better services are replacing regulatory pressure where possible with competitive pressure. Its worth saying openly that it is the likes of Cable and Wireless/Thus, Carphone Warehouse, Virgin, Sky, Orange and Tiscali along with smaller players like KCom and COLT, amongst others, that have been the engine of competition and innovation in fixed telecoms in the UK. They have been the challengers and BT, as historic incumbent, has picked up the mantle and responded with vigour. It's important we continue to support this and maintain the dynamism at the heart because the UK in many ways hasn't done badly.

But back to that intriguing idea that some people just don't want broadband. If you are reading this online there is a fair chance that you do see the joy of the Internet, but a big rump of citizens do not:

even though people are bombarded by messages about the range of benefits of being online – whether buying cheap insurance or catching up on last week's soaps – there seems to be millions of people who are not yet persuaded of the benefits.

Whether those people end up on line depends on what Digital Britain and Ofcom come up with. It will depend partly on the price and power of the pipes. But as Ed Richards acknowledged, it is the 'poetry' that the pipes carry that matters. At the moment there is not enough good stuff online that is easily accessed and enjoyed.

Despite all the depressing news of closures, cutbacks and redundancies, offline media is still very robust. Terrestrial television and newspapers and magazines still provide more than enough good content for some people to feel no

urge to hook up to the World Wide Web.

As the event chairperson [Professor Robin Mansell](#) pointed out, this is not the first time that telecoms has found itself 'at a crossroads'. But as she added, Ed Richards and the rest of the industry have more a complex set of questions about regulation, competition and consumer behaviour than ever before.

You can get the full speech [here](#)

Thanks to [Hanover Communications](#) for supporting the event. You can find out about their work in Telecoms [here](#).

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