

The second day at the National Digital Conference (ND11)

By Ellen Helsper

Here is a brief summary of what I feel was said today at the National Digital Conference (ND11) and what the unanswered questions are after the first plenary sessions. For a summary of yesterday's conference see [this morning's post](#).

After tomorrow's discussion at the LSE, we will be publishing a policy brief which contains further evidence on the possible effectiveness or lack thereof of different digital inclusion policies. So keep an eye on the blog.

This morning, Martha Lane Fox repeated what she said yesterday and added the following:

- Some discussion of “digital by default” – government, charities, organisations and (presumably) businesses are asked to justify why they should be doing things offline. She did say that it certainly shouldn't be only offline.
- Martha Lane Fox stressed that the “F-factor” (the friend factor) is the best way to learn and IT take up often facilitated by learning through others. I completely stand behind this idea as the importance of proxy users is something we've been researching for a while. I do wonder whether this will benefit people who have stronger, more literate networks over others who are socially isolated or have networks in which IT is not embedded. Our research shows that the most vulnerable have the weakest and least literate networks when it comes to learning about IT.
- The third point she made was that there needs to be more simplicity in the offering of digital inclusion – she got frustrated with the micro projects that are not part of bigger initiatives – so the keywords here are “brand simplicity.”

Jeremy Hunt stressed two things:

- how important IT is for the economy and how the UK is extremely well positioned to take advantage of the new global trade route that is the internet in principle.
- the most vulnerable in society stand to benefit most from digital participation. He focussed specifically on the socially isolated and mentioned that 29% of Britain now lives on their own, many of them are elderly or disabled or living in rural areas.

Two ‘promises’ were made by Hunt:

- The Need for Speed: Britain has one of the slowest broadband speeds in Europe (it ranks 21st) and Hunt wants to give the nation the “ambition” of having 90% of the nation on super-fast broadband by 2015 – it currently is 15%. A bit of a tough target, although fast broadband is considered to amount to at least 5mb/s.
- Must be Mobile: It seems that Britain has given up on fiber for rural areas because it's too expensive. Hunt also mentioned the internet of things here with ordinary everyday things wired up to the internet. No clear targets given for this “must be mobile” promise. I think this might clash with the first promise because mobile networks are not known for their speed.

From what Jeremy Hunt said, I deduct that the government is focusing on access and infrastructure and leaving the inspiration, skills and engagement parts of digital inclusion to the third and commercial sector.

Both Martha Lane Fox and Jeremy Hunt avoided answering a question about the sustainability of digital engagement following these initiatives and that are part of RaceOnline. The argument by



the person who asked the question was that this likely to be an issue, especially for the most vulnerable.

From the rest of the talks it seems that the charitable sector, especially those that work with the most vulnerable, are not very good at using the digital (inclusion) tools available to them. Much work is needed there.

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