

The first day of the National Digital Conference (ND11): A summary

By Ellen Helsper

As expected there were no firm commitments made by anyone in government during the ND11 introduction day yesterday evening.

All speakers used “the 9 million that are not online” as a starting point – forgetting to mention that this is based on the work from the Department of **Communities and Local Government** and that the survey work for this was done in 2009.

- UK Digital Champion Martha Lane Fox did not talk about the “digital by default” campaign but focussed on praising the volunteers’ (digital champions) and organisations’ work. She announced that there would be a big **RaceOnline** push around Christmas and the RaceOnline should offer a new model for societal change (i.e. The Big Society).
- Prime Minister David Cameron, through a pre-recorded video message, said that by 2012 as many people as possible should be online (not explaining what “being online” means, how this would be achieved, whether the government was going to do anything and what “as many as possible” is). It was interesting when he said the work of all these volunteers was so important because digital inclusion is important not only for a **strong economy** but also to create a strong **equal society** – this focus on equality has not explicitly been part of previous briefs by this government. He indicated that the government’s contribution would be to create one website with all services and delete all other (costly) websites – which sounds like DirectGov is going to be resurrected. Cameron said the goal was to be the first nation where everyone was online – we might have already lost that race, as the UK falls far behind the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands.
- MP Nick Hund (Cabinet office) also praised the volunteers and the important work they were doing. Hund repeated that many people were still not online and that we could not take the internet for granted. He mentioned the social aspect of technology, not only is the internet a “powerful source connecting people” – it is also social action that is going to solve issues of digital exclusion. Thus the Big Society argument, which according to Hund is about “reconnecting with our communities and looking out for each other.”
- BBC director Mark Thompson said that digital inclusion was important for the BBC not only because they wanted to expand and improve the use of their own services but also because it was central to the remit of the BBC that everyone should have access to information, education and public services. He announced the “**First click friends**” campaign which is basically the BBC equivalent of the RaceOnline campaign – Giving people the tools to help other people go online.
- The post office’s director Paula Vennels basically did the PR for the importance of the post office (implying that it was impossible that everyone would be able to go online and that the Post Office would be the go to centre in the community) and sold a new, kind of scarily centralised and networked biometric data collecting system called A(pplication) E(nrollment) and I(dentity).

All the politicians used a classification proposed **in a report commissioned by DCLG**, that I worked on, defining digital inclusion as providing “the tools, the skills and the inspiration” to use technologies. Mark Thompson went further and also talked about what types of engagement were expected for people to be called included (learning, use of services, social interaction, economic entrepreneurship). None of the speakers mentioned how this would be done beyond praising the volunteers and all their hard work.

Then there were the, now traditional, moving short videos of people-whose-lives-had-changed-because-of-the-internet in four standard scripts:

- 1) the elderly person (102 yrs old) – “without the internet I would not be able to talk to my grandchildren”



2) the disabled person – “without the internet I would not be able to live”

3) the socially isolated person – “without the internet I wouldn’t have any friends/would not have gotten to know my neighbours”

4) the immigrant – “without the internet I would not have found a job” (this one was a newer variation to the theme – she got a home pc through the now defunct HomeAccess scheme).

It was unclear how entrenched disadvantage was in these people’s experiences (before using the internet). For example, 1) was taught how to use the internet by her son in law who teaches computer science or something related at Imperial College – and whether it was the internet that changed things or whether other interventions/actions might have had the same effect. Also for example, 3) talked about how she now would go for coffee with her neighbour which she could not do before using the internet.

There was an exhibition with stands from several initiatives and I talked to several people from different organisations involved in RaceOnline. My general sense of from these conversations is that many are anxious to find out what the government will be putting in beyond verbal support. Many have repeatedly mentioned that this is a race without a clear route or finish (i.e. end goal), involving “1,100 organisations and digital champion volunteers running mostly without training and in different directions.” I asked about the evaluation of the programmes and the organisation that was clearest and most structured about evaluations were AgeUK. Several organisations said they might be publishing some evaluation of something this summer.

Several numbers were mentioned by people who had gotten online through each organisation. If my maths are correct, this was already over more than a million people. If this is correct than the next **OxIS** data, to be published this summer, should show a considerable increase in internet users in the population (especially amongst the elderly and disabled who are the main target of the RaceOnline it seems)

Given the lack of information on the route and goals of the RaceOnline initiatives, my burning questions at the moment are: *What are the characteristics of the volunteers and who are the people they are getting on(line)?* On the flipside of this question: *who is falling through the cracks of the RaceOnline initiatives?*

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