

Book Review

Building Britain's Future: Digital Britain. Final Report' (June 2009), Department for Business Innovation and Skills and Department for Culture, Media and Sport, London.

There is an expectation that a report numbering some 239 pages will feature high quality content and substantial critical discussion. Increasingly, though, Government reports have become little more than wordy, lightweight documents characterised by a feel of heady optimism that is presumably meant to sound visionary and inspiring, but that actually has the feel of a 'glossy PR brochure'. This Report does not disappoint in any of these respects. For Government, Digital Britain is Utopian Britain – All Shall Participate and Dissent Shall be Punished. There is the mantra, there is the soundbite that sums up the overarching message of the Report. Mustapha Mond¹ is alive and well in UK Government.

Also lending a feeling of superficiality to the Report is the readiness of the Government to engage with hideous jargon such as 'not spots', 'not a lot spots', and 'unconferences'. The trendy feel that this jargon conveys may appeal to the IT converts, but could alienate and disenfranchise wider communities for whom the Government's 'grand plan' has considerable implications. Those who are without connection into Digital Britain will be little more than an invisible underclass, receiving more limited, poorer quality, and more expensive services, while subsidising the delivery of a technological infrastructure that, if past experience and future promises are indicative, is likely to be antiquated and redundant long before its roll-out is completed. The Government's proposals to safeguard low income households while imposing levies on supposedly better-off citizens ignores the fact that even the seemingly better-off do not always have an endless well of surplus income available and, therefore, may regard Digital Britain as one 'necessity' that they can do without. For the growing number of citizens who are connected into Digital Britain, especially those for whom this is imposed rather than voluntary and who have concerns regarding personal privacy, the Report is less than reassuring. This is an issue that deserves substantial debate and deep and considered reflection but, narrowly conceptualised as a technological and regulatory matter, its treatment, too, is superficial and fails to identify and engage substantively with personal privacy defined as the right to be private, isolated from the electronic panopticon, and 'off-the-radar'.

We are told that the Interim Report that underpins the Final Report generated responses from a range of stakeholders. More than 250 written responses were received. These were supplemented by responses received through online forums, other structured forums, and 500 bilateral meetings with stakeholders. In a nation numbering more than 50 million citizens this has the feel of being a drop in the ocean. We are told nothing of the composition of the stakeholders except that they ranged from the general public to global corporations, and included users of the online environment. There is a danger here of over-representation by stakeholders with a vested interest in the pursuit of technological investment for business, personal, or other reasons.

ICT has had a seductive effect on UK governments from the outset and despite the development of substantive critique on the part of academic and other commentators Government rhetoric and understanding remain deeply technologically deterministic and utopian in outlook. This Report speaks

¹Mustapha Mond is the Comptroller of the technological dystopia that is portrayed in *Brave New World*, the visionary novel authored by Aldous Huxley.

strongly to that paradigm as the digital revolution is held up as the way to economic growth as well as social and democratic well-being. The Government's reluctance to adopt a more considered and critical approach to ICT is surprising and of some concern in light of the less than smooth roll-out of NHS computing and the problems and frustrations that have been experienced by some communities under the forced conversion to Digital Television (DTV), for example. The Government's portrayal in the Report of the success of DTV is, at the very least, suggestive of sampling bias underpinning the 'evidence' drawn on in compiling this Final Report.

ICTs should be embraced as they can bring benefits to society, economy, and polity. However, they can also bring disbenefits that bear substantial reflection and debate on the part of Government. Huxley, Orwell, and others offer intellectual commentaries that are considerably more powerful and substantive in 'fictional' form than the sweeping and ill-considered assertions that infuse this Report. Government would do well to consult them. They give us pause to reflect on the 'social construction' of technology – and the choices that this affords.

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