

Developing a people friendly Information Society in the UK

Michael Mulquin, Director IS Communications Ltd

We are well aware that the Information Society is already changing our society. Many traditional jobs have gone or have changed beyond all recognition. As a result of the way that centrally stored information can be easily accessed from anywhere, a whole range of new services has become available to us. The change is so great we can say that we are in the beginning of a new revolution – the Information Revolution

This new revolution faces us with some important questions. Will the new information highways help only global companies at the expense of local economies? Will connecting to cyberspace further isolate us all so that people have less human contact? Will there be new forms of social exclusion – the information haves and have-nots? In considering the development of a truly people friendly information society in the UK, it is worth questioning some of the paradigms that are often used. In doing this we will find that the Information Society is much richer and more complex than it is often pictured.

Not just global, but also local.

We hear a great deal about the global aspect of the new information and communication techniques. Its true that many activities enabled by the new technologies are independent of distance. However, the technologies can be applied to local activities just as much as to global ones, and the local aspect is very important.

The phrase: “the death of distance” is often used to spell out the effect of these new technologies. However this can be misleading since, while the technology is such that distance is irrelevant, the fact is that most of us live our lives on a largely local stage. At most we tend to have two or three localities around which most of our work, social life and family life revolves. Because of this, most of us are much more interested in local information, local people, local businesses and local organisations than we are in the global. Distance may be irrelevant to the new technologies, but it is very important to those who use them. As with earlier technology changes, many new activities and opportunities will arise, but most of our existing activities will survive alongside them.

Not just information, but also communication.

The phrase: “the Information Society” paints a somewhat misleading picture of people interacting with computers that store information. Experience suggests that a much more important activity is people using computers to interact with other people. Even given the immense popularity of the World Wide Web, email messaging with others remains the number one activity of most active Internet users. People want to communicate even more than they want information. Put in another way, the kind of information that most of us find most useful is the information we get through questioning and discussing with other people, whether at work or at play.

When we characterise the new technologies as “information” technologies our thinking tends to become limited. It becomes easy to use them simply to give one way information - for example putting Parliamentary reports or Government policies on the Web - rather than seeing their potential to help us communicate much more effectively - for example engaging more voters in policy debate and allowing parliamentarians wider dialogue with those they represent.

Many local authority web sites are still just static sources of one way information about their services. Most public access kiosks are still largely set up as simply information resources.

When we use these new technologies merely as new and more effective ways of one way information provision we miss out their most important uses and the most important novelty of the new era. Throughout history mass communication has been primarily a one way process, controlled by Governments, newspaper editors and owners, companies and individuals with the resources to finance radio and TV channels. The new technologies allow many-to-many communication at every level from the street and the village to the national and global. For us to compete effectively in the global market place as a nation it is not sufficient for our people to develop good information retrieval skills, they also need the skills and the ability to communicate effectively online. For us to sustain social cohesion through the coming period of decentralisation and the creation of new national entities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland we need to understand and use the community-building capabilities given to us by the new technologies.

Not just entertainment, but also interaction.

Entertainment is an important part of the online world and a fast developing market. However, increasingly people are not satisfied by being passively entertained but are seeking the kind of entertainment that is interactive. Multi-player participative games such as Doom and Quake are becoming more and more popular, as are other, more complex, role-play games. The same techniques that inform these games can also inform education, learning and training: for example bringing the online personas of famous professional actors into the classroom alongside pupils "doing Shakespeare" and professional soccer coaches into the changing room during school soccer and hockey practice. We need to ensure that the kind of technologies that are being rolled out nationally are not simply delivering high bandwidth to the home and school, but are equally able to provide high bandwidth from the home and school. Only in this way will truly interactive online services be possible, let alone understood and used. Britain leads the world in some of the most promising areas for exploitation of these techniques, but the capability must be shared by all potential innovators, not locked up in TV studios and research centres.

Not just competition but also collaboration

The significant fact about the new technologies is that for the first time it is really clear that the way to success is not simply through competitive action or by going it alone, but much more by working together. This is because the more applications are developed for online use, the more people and organisations will see the importance of going online. The more people and organisations go online, the bigger the market is for everyone. The more people and organisations use online services, the more their skills and confidence with the new technology will grow. In addition, the costs for developing applications are shared and there are more ways to access online services. It is time to change our ways of working and to build partnerships and start working collaboratively to gain maximum benefit from the opportunities we face.

Not replacing face to face contact but adding to it

New communication techniques tend to add additional ways of communicating to face to face meetings, rather than replacing them. We don't have some people we only meet face to face, others that we only telephone, and others that we only write to. By and large we tend to use all three ways of communicating with everybody we know. The letter and the phone haven't replaced the human need that we have to meet face to face, but rather allow us to maintain our relationships and continue to interact, even when it is not convenient to meet. The same thing seems to be happening with the new information technologies. Email tends to be much

more useful with people that we already know and have the opportunity to meet. Email discussion lists are much more likely to lead to worthwhile outcomes when at least a core of the members also meet face to face.

Not just some people but everybody

The new technologies have great potential for saving costs and delivering greater efficiencies in the delivery of services. However, that potential can only be properly realised when everybody can access services online. Until that time, two parallel systems will have to be in place; the online and the offline. Therefore it is really important to put great effort into ensuring that information and communication technologies are truly available to everyone as soon as possible. Universal email is a real necessity if we as a nation are really to benefit from the new technologies. This is not simply ensuring that everyone having an email address, as BT for instance is planning to do. It is just as important that everyone can easily access their email and have the support and the training to be able to use it properly.

Not just access, but also content

While widespread access is clearly vitally important, we must not forget that we need to concentrate equally on content. It is pointless to ensure that everyone can have access to the information society unless there is such a range of interesting and useful content that everyone can find enough of a reason to want to use it. The content therefore needs to appeal to a wide range of people. It has to cover the interests of every age group, and of all the wide range of human situation. It also has to be immediately and obviously useful and add value to people's lives.

Not just technology but also people

The information society is not primarily about technology but about how the new technologies can help us do what we are wanting to do anyway, better, quicker or more cheaply. Developments must not be driven primarily by what is technically possible but by what is clearly useful. It is equally true that, no matter how effective distance learning and educational materials on CD ROM or the Internet are, people will always value human contact. The only way to ensure that many people are confident and able to use the technology is to have many people providing face to face help and support.

Our Mission

These are some of the issues behind what IS Communications is attempting to achieve. We are working towards the development of a people friendly Information Society by promoting the use of the new technologies to support local communities. We suggest that every city, town, village or neighbourhood deserves to have:

- ❑ A well-organised 'gateway' web site, so that when we connect to the internet the first thing we see is our own locality online. From there, with a few clicks of the mouse, we will be able to find out all we could possibly want to know about what is going on - from local entertainment, to local businesses, local planning applications, local clubs and societies, right through to the catalogue at our local library.
- ❑ Electronic Public Space where we can discuss and debate issues of local interest, and make our views known to local authorities, the local MP, and other agencies. A place where we can be creative and share our poetry, stories and art. A place where we can have fun, tell jokes and make new friends, whom we could also meet face to face because they live in the same community.

- ❑ Systems that make it easy for us to "do business" locally, not only to shop online, but also to pay our Council Tax, book appointments with our GP or the hairdresser, book to see local shows and visit the cinema - or whatever else we need to do.
- ❑ Support for local small businesses, community and voluntary organisations and special interest groups to enable them to use the new technology effectively, so that the institutions that bind a physical community together can also play that role in cyberspace.
- ❑ Access, training and support in using technology for **everyone**.

Such facilities will promote local economies by making it easy for people to do business online with local companies. They will promote social cohesion by making it easy for everyone to get involved with their local community. They will make it easy to build a socially inclusive information society by making sure not only that all sections of the community have access, but also that there is content and applications available online that is useful and important for everyone.

We suggest that this is one of the most effective ways that we as a nation are likely to gain real benefit from the new developments in IT. What do you think? If you agree with us, what do you think needs to happen to support the development of a locally focused information society in the UK? Why not contact us so that we can work together towards a people friendly information society?