

Broadband in the public interest



If the UK's government-led superfast fibre networks are rolled out on schedule, the country should have the fastest broadband connection in Europe by 2015. But what does this mean for the regular consumer? LSE's Maria Paula Brito argues that even with the right technology in place, mass adoption is not going to be instant.

A recent [study](#) by the Broadband Stakeholder Group (BSG) on the demand for fast broadband in the UK found that the "UK's initial growth curve for superfast broadband services compares favourably to that of Japan's when superfast services were first offered in the market (...) currently outperforming major peers such as France, Germany and Spain." This point was further explored in the presentation of this report on November 26th, when panellists highlighted the opportunity for the UK to become a leader in service innovation.

What began as a techno-centric discussion, however, shifted when Dr. Kate Cornick, Executive Director of the Melbourne-based [Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society](#) (IBES), spoke about the role of broadband as a public good, giving Australia's [National Broadband Network](#) as a key example. Implemented in 2010, the initiative aims to improve productivity, health, education, communications and connectivity between cities and rural communities through a state-led effort to install high speed broadband infrastructure (with capacity of up to 100Mbps) throughout the country.

The view of the Internet user as a citizen, rather than a mere consumer, is reinforced in the LSE-Convergys Report, "[Costs and Benefits of Superfast Broadband in the UK](#)", published in May 2012, which argues that broadband can foster development in society "by encouraging participation, both in civic affairs and in communities". However, one of the most crucial issues related to the internet in the public sphere is the digital divide. According to the Report, this divide is produced by those who voluntarily exclude themselves from the system and those who are involuntarily excluded due to costs, lack of skills and disability. This makes the digital divide a complex concept which pertains both to the lack of access and infrastructure. Further, the LSE-Convergys Report states that "no matter how widespread high-speed coverage may be, approaching 100% take-up is likely to take another 15 years."

Thus the only way the internet may enhance political participation and create an inclusive digital community is if discussions about coverage are addressed through a multidisciplinary perspective. The BSG event ended with open debates on the government's role in providing infrastructure and promoting digital inclusion in the UK. But knowing that fast broadband provision can only be sustainable with private investment, another question also needs to be asked: is it possible to see broadband both as a commercial product as well as a public good?

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