Superfast pipes to speed us out of slump: Ofcom's Ed Richards at Polis

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Technological breakthroughs seem to happen at times of economic recession. So surely now is the time to invest in the best possible infrastructure for superfast broadband?

Frederic Filloux argues that innovation is recession-resistant and cites inventions such as the mobile (1948!), the laser (1958), the Internet ancestor Arpanet (1969), and the PC (1981) as examples of technological triumphs in the midst of economic downturns. It is a contentious theory, if only because it is hard to date any innovation to a particular year, but it kind of rings true. When we are struggling with existing systems, we tend to look for new ways of doing things and for the competitive advantage offered by innovative devices.

The 21st century is already dependent for growth on digital and Internet related business, so boosting the framework feels like a wise investment. If we have billions for the bankers, surely we can spare some of the money going to reboot the economy for the nations's digital mainframe?

Tonight the chief executive officer of Britain's Telecoms regulator, Ed Richards, will give a keynote speech at Polis where he will tackle this vital issue. It will be a significant moment where Ofcom can contribute to the debate set in motion by Lord Carter's Digital Britain report, due out this summer.

Everyone agrees that universal superfast broadband is needed to speed the UK to economic recovery and growth, but how much do we want to spend as a nation on this and who will pay?

The plan so far has been that the Telecoms companies who first put in all that wiring for conventional telephony shoud continue the job. They should spend billions to improve the pipes. In Lord Carter's phrase, that would mean we could then concentrate on the "poetry", the stuff that actually flows through them.

However, can BT and the rest afford this at the moment? They have indicated that they will press ahead with plans to upgrade the system but the irony is that the telecoms companies will not make as much from broadband as all the people selling goods and services online. Is there a way they should contribute? Or should government decide that this is so important that the taxpayer should put up the money to make sure that we get the best broadband for all?

And how will we pay for the content on this lovely superfast digital highway? Should we sacrifice net neutrality in the interest of encouraging business? If it works for the railways and airlines to have first and second class, then why not the Internet? Should be trade our private data for commercial advantage?

The more you look at it, the more you realise that this set of questions around broadband structure goes beyond the pipes. That is why the Digital Britain review is so important at setting an agenda for policy-making. And that is why it will be fascinating to hear what Ed Richards says tonight.

Join us at 6.30pm in the New Theatre, Houghton Street, LSE

Tonight's event will be chaired by Professor Robin Mansell and is supported by Hanover Communications.

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