

APPG ON CHARITIES AND VOLUNTEERING: FUTURE OF THE SECTOR

12.30-14.00 Tuesday 23 October, Committee Room 14

Rhodri Davies, Head of Policy, Charities Aid Foundation

- Want to talk about the impact technology will play on civil society in the future. Charities Aid Foundation run a in house think tank called Giving Thought. We have done some thinking about the impact of disruptive technology and its impact on civil society.
- Technology is changing our lives and is impacting the way we learn. It is not a choice if we engage, the real question is how and the timescale we use.
- Some of the positives of the change in technology are; the opening of new possibilities for both social and environmental goods. For example we have recently heard how the use of artificial intelligence will be used to help people with early onset Parkinson's. Technologies like blockchain, while there are few meaningful examples, have been used by organisations like the world food programme to make the use of vouchers more trustworthy. Virtual reality can be used to help organisations like Oxfam increase empathy and promote giving as it would give the opportunity for people to step into the shoes of beneficiaries.
- In a broader sense technology will impact the day to day operational environment of charities. The ways in which people interact and support charities could completely change with the growth of Siri and Alexa, within the fundraising and commercial sphere. With the growth of new currencies and digital assets we need to make sure we harness these new resources for good causes.
- With the growth of a new open data movement technology can be used to help increase transparency and accountability. It can also help to change the nature of the relationship between charities and their beneficiaries.
- As organisations serve marginalised people, technology is changing the nature of our service users. If we don't catch up we could risk becoming irrelevant.
- Recently, there has been a lot of thought as to how the rise in automation will change the workplace and what the role of civil society is in this. How we help communities manage this change.
- The rise in artificial intelligence and automation has been dubbed the, 'fourth industrial revolution'. We need to make sure that we are on hand to make sure that we are in place to help counter some of the negative consequences.

Julia Unwin, Chair of the Independent Inquiry Into the Future of Civil Society

- We launched the civil society futures inquiry two years ago which is finally reporting in November 2018. We did not do a standard inquiry, we went around England and really dove deep into local communities. When visiting small organisations across the country you get the sense of how much the environment is changing and the challenges that many communities face. We are detached from civil society.
- A key finding was that place and space really matter, in particular where people work and enjoy themselves. Civil society is important when asking what the meaning of place really is, especially in regard to history and culture. There is an anxiety of our diminishing shared spaces, this leads to little mixing in communities.
- Bedraggled shared civil society spaces are important. When we engaged with young people we found that they are just as proud of where they come from than other age groups.
- The changing nature of work and purpose has impacted men, previously their main affiliation and identity came from their place of work. The high turnover of work is affecting people's sense of belonging and affiliation. We need to make sure that civil society is there to help make sure people feel proud and have a sense of belonging.
- Our communities are deeply divided in terms of towns, cities, racism and civil society.
- The shape of civil society is changing, institutions are challenging and tripping each other up. How do we respond to people who say we got it wrong. Small local groups do not feel that government has their back. Trust is like a currency it is worth more than our brand name and balance sheets. Trust keeps us going with government and the community.
- Civil society needs to pay attention to our big challenges. If we had listened to our communities we would not have been surprised by the outcome of the Brexit vote. Civil society highlighted both the Windrush scandal and stories of sexual exploitation before the stories blew up in national press.
- Civil society needs to invest in trust as we enter the fourth industrial revolution. We have an urgent task to respond to our challenges and to make sure there are no cold spots in civil society. Government is dependent on a strong and healthy civil society. There has never been an example in history of when civil society has not stepped up to big changes in society. Our purpose has been to connect people to power.

Kirsty McNeil, Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns, Save the Children

- Using Gary Lineker as an example, he encompasses lots of different labels, is he a celebrity, activist or a publisher? In reality, he is all of these things - he typifies the charity sector's monopoly on civil society.
- With a growth in corporations incorporating corporate social responsibility and growth of social enterprises we need to start seeing these organisations as our competition. We need to reappraise what makes us different and valuable in this sector.
- One of the things we do that is different is campaigning. We are in a constant state of defending certain government policies e.g. the commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on aid. We are constantly defending this policy from the scrutiny of the media and government. Charities are best placed to do this as they have a long term mandate to change children's lives.
- Charities are best placed to employ an advocacy led campaigning strategy. Organisations like Save the Arctic lead by policy demand evidence gathering.
- Agenda setting and campaigning - organisations like Black Lives Matter have a moral reality to reassert. When a legacy institution campaigns they come with a proven track record of effective campaigning. Bigger charities are also best placed to help smaller organisations when it comes to providing a platform.
- Generally, there is a deep sense that power needs to be redistributed. In the Black Lives Matter movement nobody knows who is in charge. However in the charity sector we need to have an emphasis on accountability.
- We need to make sure that we are continually supporting and empowering staff. The sector is not confident that we can attract and retain talent. We need more people to explain why they are so proud to work in the charity sector, we need to develop and nurture talent.
- As there is less money available, the sector is a lot more creative in how to get things done. The people who support us have a lot of imagination and our job is to catch up with people who want to change the world.

Questions

Susan Elan Jones MP started off by asking whether technology makes a decentralised process more possible and how this might affect the voluntary sector. Rhodri Davies responded by saying that technology offers opportunities that were previously only available when resources were centralised. We need to strike a balance in the middle. How can we in civil society, understand the potential of new social movements? We need to help campaigns such as, 'justice for Grenfell' achieve their potential.

Julia Unwin talked about how against a backdrop of a divided society we need civil society to remain a place where we talk about difficult things. Civil society is born out of the anger and passion of people who

want to change things in our society. We can risk being preoccupied by the shiny and new. What matters is how we achieve social purpose.

Kirsty responded by highlighting the importance of legacy institutions and asked how we can deal with the rising stigma against big charities. We need to promote the benefit of legacy institutions. Some situations require a large scale operation and expertise. For example, when working to help combat Ebola, it is agreed that some things are best done by paid staff and not volunteers, especially when it comes to the issue of safeguarding. Legacy institutions should be better at providing smaller organisations with a platform.

A question was then asked to Julia Unwin regarding how the UK might use soft power in an international context post Brexit. Julia responded by saying that the inquiry had been about England only. We are conscious of civil societies soft power and our main focus post Brexit must be about protecting rights. We need to have a say on the kind of country we become post Brexit.

The conversation was moved onto the impact of the digital divide and how we can make sure organisations and communities are not left behind. Rhodri responded by saying that the digital divide is getting bigger, we need to change how we engage with and work with the technology. We need to be aware that the poorest and most vulnerable in society will be affected most by the digital boom.

Julia responded by talking about, 'giving the power' which was talked about in the interim reporting of civil society futures, which discussed a shift in power. We do not want power to be dumped locally without additional capacity. Place based funding needs to be decided locally, however this could burden overstretched local decision makers. However, we do not want this to be seen as an instance of simply passing the problem on and walking away. Additional support and structure will be required.

A question was then raised about the sector's digital divide in terms of artificial intelligence. This kind of technology will only be available to a small number of bigger charities. Rhodri responded by saying that we need to find practical ways to help organisations harness this technology and have a meaningful voice in how these technologies are developed.