



Birmingham Post editor Marc Reeves, in BPM Media's Fort Dunlop offices

# Report must show understanding of the regional media

Ahead of chairing the "Content is King" panel at Wednesday's Digital Britain event, *Birmingham Post* editor **Marc Reeves** explores the issues local news providers need to see addressed in Lord Carter's report

"Content is king" is the over-used mantra of many in the media industry.

By that we mean that however you choose to read, view or listen to what we produce, our priority should be the quality and variety of the information or entertainment we provide.

It seems self-evident, but anyone following the debate that's raged since Lord Carter published his interim report in January would be forgiven for thinking that all we cared about was 'channels', 'platforms' and 'routes to market'.

However, in the digital age, content and platform are inextricably linked by a common denominator: money.

As commercial operations, newspapers like the *Birmingham Post*, radio stations like Heart and television operations like Central must do what they do profitably, or their content will simply cease to exist.

Faced with the double threat of structural change and recession, commercial media operations are fighting for their survival on several fronts.

Structural challenges mean the combined effect of demographic and technological changes are spreading the available audiences ever more thinly over many different platforms – and we have no choice but to follow.

So now you have radio stations publicising text news services online, TV companies publishing viewers' pictures on their sites and newspapers streaming video and publishing audio podcasts.

All of this demands investment in new skills, infrastructure and technology, at precisely the time that the global recession is hitting the media sector harder than almost any other industry sector in the United Kingdom.

As the rest of business slashes its marketing budgets – and, therefore, our advertising revenue – we have embarked on a radical transformation to keep up with the new world. But, as one colleague once remarked: "You lose a pound of print revenue and get back a penny online".

The economics of the new world compound the cyclical impact of the recession

just as we enter the transitional phase – with all the extra burden that entails.

This conundrum has led to some of the most innovative responses I've seen in my 20-odd years in the industry – but also some chilling foretastes of what could happen if the environment we operate in remains untouched.

That's why my company, Trinity Mirror and other newspaper publishers have lobbied the government and Lord Carter in particular to recognise the value of the regional press by implementing policies that help ensure its survival.

I am immensely proud of the newsroom revolution we achieved here in Birmingham last year in response to the first salvos of the downturn – but even more proud of how the campaigning regional journalism that comes out of our new multimedia newsroom is now held up as an example to the rest of the world.

True multi-platform, multi-title campaigns such as our support for Jaguar Land Rover give just a hint of what is possible for the regional press in the new world. However, the changes came at a cost, in terms of jobs and even newspaper titles as we sought to thrive in a much colder economic climate.

We closed some local weekly newspapers on the fringes of our geographical area because we could no longer publish them profitably.

Some of those were the only papers to cover their town, meaning there is now no real local independent media left to champion community causes in these areas – or to monitor and report on the activities of local politicians.

Crucially, many of these titles were very attractive to other publishers who believed they could turn them around because they were a better fit with their portfolios than Trinity Mirror's.

But the current competition regime and ownership laws have continually prevented publishers from making such sensible moves.

Lord Carter's interim report six months ago infuriated the regional press because its issues were all but omitted from those covered.

We hope that the intervening time and our vigorous lobbying have persuaded him to recognise the value of local papers.

Not just for the sake of Trinity Mirror's shareholders but also for its employees and most importantly its readers and the communities they live in.

# Adding shape to

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As Lord Carter speaks at the ICC, a fringe event for those shaping the region's digital landscape at grassroots level will take place at Fazeley Studios.

Digital Birmingham and Aquila TV are organising an "unconference" on Wednesday which coincides with the main Digital Birmingham event as well as with Fazeley Studios' Fazeley Digital 09 festival.

It will bring together 120 representatives from the creative, digital

and media industries for a series of panel events and debates around Lord Carter's presentation of the final Digital Britain report.

The main ICC event will be video streamed live to Fazeley Studios and the unconference delegates will be encouraged to feed back via social networks such as Twitter.

Aquila TV co-director Julia Higginbottom said: "The Digital Britain report is all about maximising the potential of the digital revolution and making its benefits accessible, which is the premise of 'unconferences'.

"The official event can only accommodate a small proportion of those

people that are passionate about the issues raised by Lord Carter's report. New media tools such as video streaming and Twitter allow us to broaden the audience and tap into all the extra knowledge and energy that is out there among the creative and digital communities.

"Our delegates will be able to follow the Lord Carter event and feed in questions and comments via Twitter. It is not about watching the event from afar, it is about live and interactive participation where the fringe event feeds back into the official conference and helps to shape it."

Digital Britain unconferences

# digital landscape

emerged in reaction to the Digital Britain Summit in April hosted at the British Library. They are a set of UK-wide, volunteer-organised events that aimed to produce a representative "grassroots response" and gather a set of positive, realistic contributions for the report.

Dave Harte, of Digital Birmingham, said: "Aquila TV organised the first Digital Britain Unconference for the West Midlands in May and we were amazed by the breadth of engagement and the depth of ideas that came out of the event."

"It led to the submission of notes for consideration in the final report.

Recommendations were put forward around the key areas of digital networks, investment, intellectual property, public services and education and skills.

"Attendees also picked up on the fact that the report focuses more on the needs of existing businesses and less on the challenges that face new entrants to market and the needs of the general public.

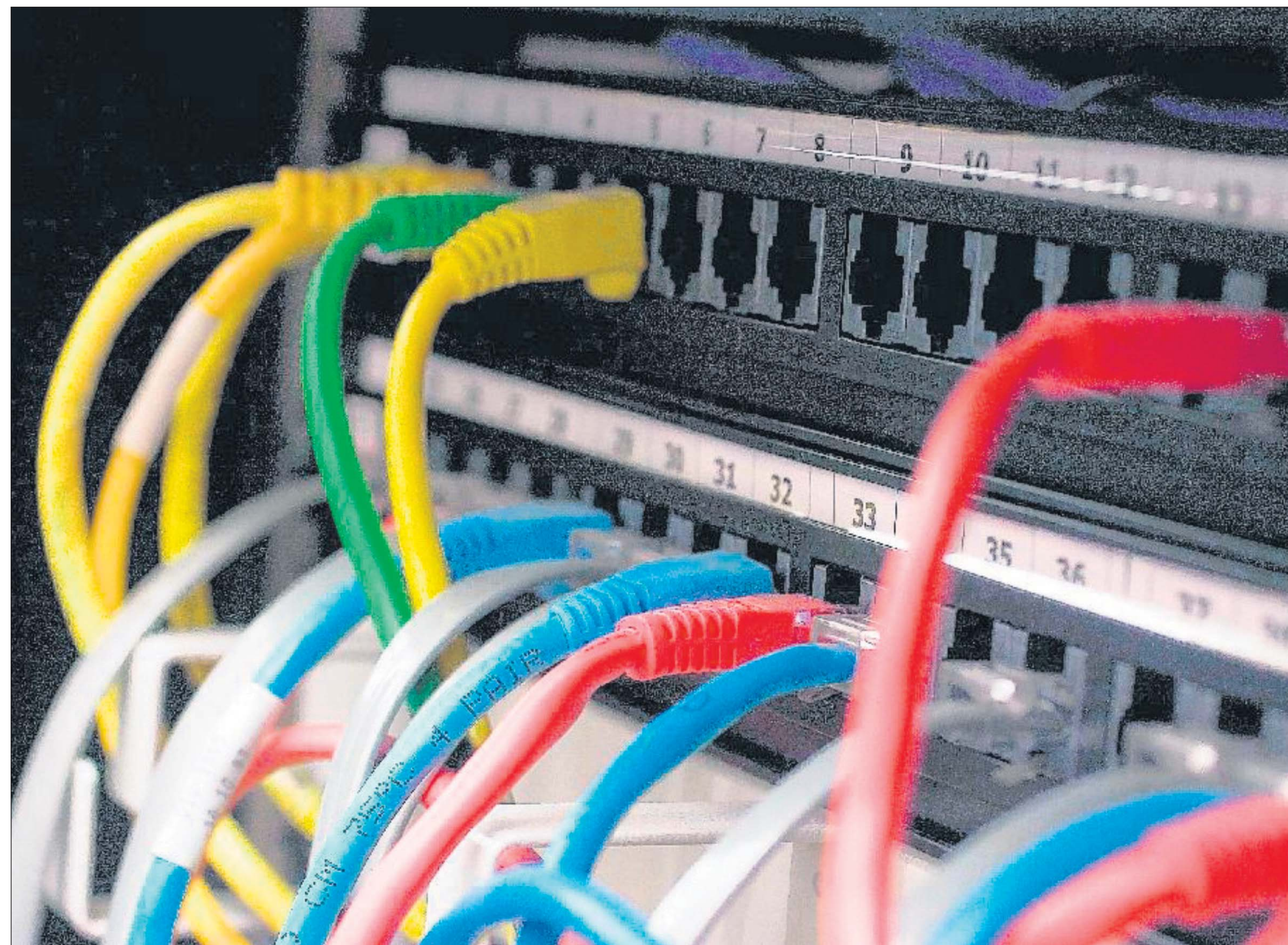
"Although unconferences eschew structure and agendas, they are a real forum for action and their use of technology such as blogs, archives and social networks allows their powerful conversations to de-

velop beyond the perimeters of the physical event."

The Digital Britain unconference is the penultimate event of Fazeley Digital 09 festival which concludes with a high tea finale for creative companies on Thursday.

A weekly high tea has become something of an institution since Fazeley Studios opened with tenants gathering once a week in the 19th century gallery reception for finger sandwiches, cakes, scones and clotted cream and tea.

■ For more information about the Digital Britain Unconference go to <http://dbuc09.eventbrite.com>



Around three million homes in the UK have broadband speeds of less than two megabits per second

# Bits and bytes that hold key to city's future prosperity

Digital Birmingham director **Chris Price** will be chairing the infrastructure panel at the Digital Britain event. He lays down the case for investment in new technology to allow Birmingham to compete with cities such as Amsterdam and Paris

your living room. In a global economy, Birmingham has to compete with cities such as Amsterdam, Eindhoven and Paris who are investing in Next Generation Access.

Telecommunications infrastructure is now a key aspect of how cities are judged – one analysis puts it as the third-highest factor in choosing a place to do business.

A question for Digital Britain is will the Government invest directly in an infrastructure that is fit for the changing economy and lifestyles? This could be used by any service provider and therefore provide greater choice and value for the consumer.

We get gas and electricity from whichever company we choose without having to put another pipe into the house. Can telecommunications not work the same way?

Many of our homes (more than 40 per cent) and our small businesses (38 per cent) have not connected. Why not? Many people are reluctant to enter into lengthy contracts and are moving away from landlines, preferring instead their mobile phones.

We are increasingly connected at all times through our mobiles or BlackBerries and there is growing need for more reliable and faster links while on the move.

Birmingham already has a starting point for new services through Birminghamfiz, the new city centre WiFi free information zone; along with a proof of concept for public and private transport information that aims to make us the first 'Intelligent City' in the UK; plus a thriving and innovative social media sector.

The future prosperity of our city is dependent upon bits and bytes flowing smoothly and quickly to businesses and to homes.

We are a city founded on innovation and entrepreneurship.

We need to attract and retain digital innovators and entrepreneurs. For that we need investment now in the digital infrastructure.

The Digital Britain report to be published next week is relevant to all of Birmingham.

Will it help us to create the new jobs in the city to respond to the recession? Will it offer opportunities to our vibrant creative sector? Will it help us to benefit from transformed public and information services?

Will Digital Britain give a national lead to complement our efforts to create a Digital Birmingham?

Underpinning the digital future is the digital infrastructure, both wired and wireless.

Birmingham already has broadband from BT, Virgin Media and others, so what's the problem? There are several.

The Government seems to believe that two megabits per second is a "fast enough" broadband speed, but if you have tried to send a video across a standard broadband line, you will have learned that then is the time to make a cup of tea.

Upload rates are low; lines are shared so you rarely get the headline speeds.

If you are trying to work from home or are a small business reliant on these connections, even e-mail can be painfully slow.

What we need for business is guaranteed, symmetric connectivity – the sort that can be delivered by optical fibre direct to your home, often called Next Generation Access.

This solution can connect you to your work, your business to the global market place and bring High Definition (3D) entertainment to



Digital Birmingham Director Chris Price

Visit [birminghampost.net/creative](http://birminghampost.net/creative) to see the Digital Britain event on our live video stream, and take part in the live blog at 10.45am on Wednesday.