

Bridging the UK's digital divide

■ 'Very soon, it's going to be much harder to have the same choices, access the same information and operate as a member of society in the same way as another person if you're not online,' says Martha Lane Fox, the UK's first 'digital inclusion champion' and guest speaker at the Society's latest 21st Century Challenges event, Digital divide in the UK?, this month.

A decade on from co-founding internet business sensation Lastminute.com in a South Kensington flat, the 36-year-old entrepreneur is now the head of a new government taskforce, and will be speaking about how she hopes to provide six million Britons with improved access to digital technologies.

'I want to make sure we're not leaving behind those people who've already had a tricky time,' she said on her acceptance of the appointment in June. 'I hope the impact technology has had on my life can be the same for everyone, regardless of their circumstances.'

Of the 15 million people in the UK still without access to the internet, Lane Fox's target group are those identified as the most socially and economically disadvantaged, who, according to research, are least likely to want to get online, yet who have the most to gain from doing so.

With improved employment opportunities and an average annual saving of £570 just two of the well-documented benefits of digital proficiency, Lane Fox is enthusiastic about the transformational impact technology can have on even the most difficult-to-reach individuals.

She cites successful projects such as that of Bristol entrepreneur Mil Lusk, who used the skills she learnt at a new media centre in one of the city's most deprived areas to set up an online business selling home-grown vegetables. 'Others had been using

the facilities [at the centre] to do things such as lobby the council for improved public services,' says Lane Fox. 'Technology was the tool that amplified their individual voices into many. It gave them the means to convey the pride and passion they had always felt for their community, but had previously found difficult to express.'

Adamant that digital disparity should not be a generational issue, Lane Fox is determined that the over-65s, who currently account for half of the population not online, can also be catered for in the 'world of tech'. 'It's all about finding that bit of magic for the individual,' she says. 'Whether they're using applications such as Facebook to communicate more regularly with their friends and family, doing art projects, or writing their memoirs, older people have the opportunity to discover new skills and maintain their independence into later life.'

'Technology gave them the means to convey the pride and passion they had always felt for their community'

By supporting the growth of existing peer-to-peer training and networking schemes, and convincing private enterprise to come up with useful digital products and services that aren't 'tricky or scary' to use, Lane Fox aims to encourage more people to consider how different technologies might not only fit into their lives, but improve them.

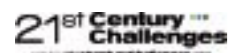
Working in her office in Marylebone, which overlooks a social housing estate with poor internet take-up located just around the corner from 'hedge funds with super-fast broadband networks', Lane Fox knows that geographical complexity is one of numerous obstacles to her ambition to halve the figure

of four million who have never even used the internet by 2012.

She acknowledges that to many, the gulf may already seem too wide to bridge, but is nevertheless optimistic, believing that matching people with 'talent and resources' to those without will be the most significant way to bring about change. 'It's what I hope is a non-controversial subject and one that I can bring some energy and noise to,' she says with a smile. 'The least I can do is try to keep it high up the political agenda, to stop us from assuming that everyone is riding the same wave of digital excitement.'



Martha Lane Fox will speak at the Society's 21st Century Challenges discussion, Digital divide in the UK?, on 1 December, at the RGS-IBG headquarters in London. For more information, visit www.21stcenturychallenges.org or see the event listing opposite



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ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY (WITH IBG)

SELECTION OF EVENTS



1 DECEMBER, 7PM
21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES: Digital divide in the UK?
(Discussion series, London)
Does the internet's rapid evolution threaten to leave some sections of society behind? How can we create digital equality? Join Martha Lane Fox, Professor Tanya Byron, and the BBC's Rory Cellan-Jones to discuss this complex modern issue.
i Tickets: RGS-IBG members £7, non-members £10. More details at www.21stcenturychallenges.org. To book, contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

5-6 DECEMBER, 9.30AM
CHRISTMAS ECO FAIR
(Shopping event, London)
A great opportunity to buy Christmas presents with an ethical edge, with a wide range of contemporary, eco-friendly and unusual products from all over the world, including palm leaf tableware, luxury alpaca woollens and scarves, as well as a wide range of fair-trade and 'recycled' jewellery.
i Free and open to the public 9.30am-5pm, 5 December, and 10am-4pm, 6 December. Refreshments available. Friday night preview for RGS-IBG members. Visit www.theecofair.co.uk or email info@theecofair.co.uk for details

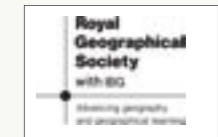
7 DECEMBER, 7.30PM
LIBYA AWAKENS
(Lecture, Chester)
Libya is a unique country, with Phoenician, Greek and Roman remains existing alongside the indigenous cultures of the Gramantians and Berbers. It's especially interesting now as it emerges from isolation. Joint lecture with the Geography Department of Chester University, the Chester GA and the Society of Thirteen. Venue: Chester University (Best Building), Parkgate Road, Chester.
i For details, contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

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3 DECEMBER, 7.30PM
RGS-IBG MEMBERS' EVENING
(Social event, Romsey)
Come and share your experiences in ten minutes or less using ten to 12 slides. Specialist subjects, travel accounts and traditional or digital slides are equally welcome. Indicate your proposed topic when applying for tickets. Non-speakers are also very welcome. Venue: King John's House, Church Street, Romsey.
i Tickets: £6 (including refreshments). For further details, contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

7 DECEMBER, 6.30PM
SIR GORDON CONWAY: An ecologist's journey, Borneo to Beijing
(Members' lecture, London)
Come and mark the end of Sir Gordon's term as Society president as he recounts a journey that begins in the rainforest of north Borneo and ends in the Chinese corridors of power, taking in the Chiang Mai and Hunza valleys along the way.
i Free to RGS-IBG members and one guest. The lecture will be followed by a black-tie dinner in the Main Hall (book in advance: tickets £40, includes three courses, wine and coffee)

7 DECEMBER, 2PM
BE INSPIRED... A photographer's life: the work of Captain John Noel
(Afternoon talk series, London)
Sandra Noel, daughter of Captain John Noel, presents the fourth in this new series of monthly afternoon talks given by speakers who have used the Society's collections to inspire their writing, travel or personal research. Venue: Education Centre, RGS-IBG.
i Tickets are free to RGS-IBG members and educational users. Non-members: £5, payable in advance. Pre-booking required. Contact 020 7591 3044 or showcase@rgs.org



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