

Who should Labour listen to on AI, tech and public services?

4:30–5:30pm, Tuesday 25 June 2024 on Zoom

Introduction

Labour is pledging to reform public services with tech. But who should they listen to on how to do it?

This won't be at the top of the mainstream news or appear as flagship announcements in manifestos. It will be on many minds across the tech space, and has significant implications for the public.

This online election event will draw out some of the dividing lines and dig into the ideas of people within the tech policy ecosystem seeking to influence the next government.

Joining the discussion will be:

- John Thornhill, innovation editor, Financial Times (Chair)
- Dr Jeni Tennison, Executive Director, Connected by Data
- James Plunkett, NESTA and author of End State
- Jeegar Kakkad, Director of Government Innovation, Tony Blair Institute
- Caroline Selman, Senior Research Fellow, Public Law Project

Zoom chat transcript

Below is a copy of the live Zoom chat from the event. It has had minor edits to improve post-event readability including keeping threads of conversations together and removing emoji reactions.

16:33:09 From Gavin Freeguard to Everyone:

Tonight's hustings event:

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_WJkFEPjkT0icQiQRpkjDEg#/registration

16:38:33 From Miranda Sharp to Everyone:

Love that, "supplementing dodgy tech with hallucinating AI"

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16:40:17 From Gavin Freeguard to Everyone:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/algorithmic-transparency-recording-standard-hub>

16:44:22 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

As well as asking who government should listen to, we should also ask how we upskill ministers, MPs and civil servants on the pros and cons of AI and automation more generally so that they can be informed, confident and critical commissioners and service designers

16:46:31 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

What are the does and don'ts for you on this?

16:46:51 From Cat.Cutmore to Everyone:

So much, think there's such a lack of wider understanding

16:46:57 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

100%. Understanding these technologies should be a critical capability in civil service and political leadership roles.

16:47:40 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

It's partly a technical question - what can these technologies ACTUALLY do and not do (what is just hype) and it's also about how do commissioners etc ask the right questions

16:48:26 From Miranda Sharp to Everyone:

and what they are reliant on. Good data for example.

16:48:27 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

Agree - There's challenges both around capabilities AND perceived capabilities

16:49:25 From Jeegar Kakkad to Everyone:

TBI's report has proposals on how to upgrade and upskill the civil service.

16:44:30 From Jakub Krupa to Everyone:

What are the key regulatory changes and reforms you want the next government to focus on and why?

16:45:18 From Anne McCrossan to Everyone:

Nodding vehemently with everything you're saying Jeni Tennison

16:45:54 From Kate Jago to Everyone:

me too!

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16:45:29 From Jeegar Kakkad to Everyone:

This is the TBI report on Governing in the Age of AI that Jeni mentioned:

<https://www.institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/governing-in-the-age-of-ai-a-new-model-to-transform-the-state>

16:45:30 From simon cross CofE to Everyone:

Do we need to retain a biometrics and surveillance commissioner?

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/report-finds-worrying-vacuum-in-surveillance-camera-plans>

16:48:08 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

Further to my point above, there is a risk of ministers etc being swayed by hype and sales patter by big tech firms as their resources are much bigger than e.g. civil society - they can afford to have much louder voices

16:48:49 From Anne McCrossan to Everyone:

Sadly, I think this has been going on for years.

16:49:05 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

oh yes, not a new thing, just a new arena for it!

16:49:35 From Cat.Cutmore to Everyone:

Think there's also a question about public understanding. Do citizens know enough to properly advocate for their rights. Wider problem for digital but compounded by AI I sense.

17:05:29 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Would be good if people with Tech skills who care would get involved in their local Tech for Good network eg

<https://x.com/uktechforgood?t=GX8XhhGoHeWskr0IVNNOMA&s=09>

16:49:08 From Jack Stilgoe to Everyone:

Interesting framework Jeegar Kakkad. Could any machine learning systems tick all five boxes while still being useful? I can't think of any.

16:50:24 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

Agree with James that there is also a positive vision for tech and AI - we have been doing some work on community tech, community data : <https://www.communitytech.network/>

16:51:25 From Miranda Sharp to Everyone:

I wonder if there is an interesting discrepancy between regulation and governance? How do we govern the ecosystem rather than regulate the players, because we can't?

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16:52:33 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

One specific proposal is that we should introduce concurrency for regulators on equalities obligations, similar to the way we do on competition law. This would mean regulators like the FCA and others would have an explicit mandated to stop discriminatory uses of technologies e.g. in finance. At the moment they leave the space to the EHRC which is ill-equipped to get into these complex questions within sectors.

16:53:10 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

Can you share any resource on this?

16:55:33 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

To be on topic, here's chatGPT's answer:

<https://chatgpt.com/share/0d1f26c8-d3a6-4baf-bf37-38bd4873cf93>

16:52:58 From Terence Eden to Everyone:

AI rests on high quality and comprehensive data. Currently, the open data landscape in government is still somewhat lacklustre. Is AI a "wedge" to convince Government to collect and publish better data?

16:56:42 From Jeni Tennison to Everyone:

Really relevant tweet on this earlier:

https://twitter.com/Bob_Fischer/status/1805243981959213158

16:57:21 From Ben Welby to Everyone:

I was amazed to find out that there hasn't been a digital inclusion strategy since Maude's of 2014. For all the brilliant work on service design the UK has done I find myself looking at the experiences of Chile, Portugal, Greece, Canada where they've blended the digital and the analogue.

16:57:51 From Ben Welby to Everyone:

(or tried to at least acknowledge the need to)

16:58:44 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

Yes it's crazy - how much has technology changed in the last 10 years?

17:02:39 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Yep; I'm encouraging my networks in the digital inclusion ecosystem to ask candidates what they plan to do about this, and other things to bridge the digital divide

16:57:49 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

Excellent question Margaret - interested to hear everyone's responses - we published a paper on this a couple of weeks ago, with a range of policy recommendations for the next

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government!

<https://www.promisingtrouble.net/blog/a-radically-inclusive-approach-to-digital-society>

16:58:04 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

It includes a proposal to make all digital services inclusive by design

17:00:17 From David to Everyone:

The PT report is excellent as is this report (despite the silly name) from Demos and the ex-CEO of Barking and Dagenham local authority :

<https://demos.co.uk/research/only-we-can-save-the-state-lessons-for-national-government-from-public-service-reform-in-barking-and-dagenham>. It takes in a lot from the great work humanising and bringing together gov services by Hilary Cottam.

17:01:00 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

Thanks David!

17:02:03 From David to Everyone:

"If you digitise a broken services, you just get a digital broken service"

17:02:11 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

I think this question is a great example of some of the tough trade-offs we'll face on AI. For example, a huge amount of time for frontline practitioners is spent writing up notes, often while a patient or job seekers is sitting in front of them. This is terrible for the quality of the interaction and AI can solve a lot of this problem. But that requires us to get to a place of trustworthiness (justified trust) on the way we use AI, collect data, etc.

17:03:37 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

Connected by Data and the TUC found that public sector workers were excluded from designing systems and then faced non-functioning and error prone automated systems for citizen facing services

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/snapshot-workers-wales-understanding-and-experience-ai>

17:03:38 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

On the idea of a Local Government Digital Service by the way, here's the post John was referring to: <https://medium.com/@jamestplunkett/helping-local-digital-work-b628178df647>

17:10:23 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

I'd love to see missions be a galvanising force for this. If they're done properly (IMHO!) it would mean having a D&T strategy at the level of the mission, e.g. bridging central and local govt and wider private sector and civil society. Could be transformative in achieving these kinds of complements. (An example would be: how do you bring together all the relevant actors to build a shared data ecosystem for

home decarbonisation - planning data, installations, EPC data, etc.)

17:15:34 From Nic Wistreich to Everyone:

Good to see a mention of Local Gov Drupal there <https://localgovdrupal.org/>

17:16:46 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

Big fan!

17:03:53 From Jack Stilgoe to Everyone:

Great to have Margaret Colling here. Jeni and Connected by Data are too modest to say so, but the People's Panel is a brilliant initiative:

<https://connectedbydata.org/projects/2023-peoples-panel-on-ai>. As part of www.rai.ac.uk, we just launched a programme on public voices to build on the People's Panel work: <https://digitalgood.net/opportunities/the-public-voices-in-ai-fund/>

17:08:14 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

It's worth saying though that the DWP digitisation of Universal Credit saved the system in the pandemic. Allowed it to cope with a massive surge in caseloads and is really a triumph of digital transformation.

17:10:21 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Loads of people still missing out as they can't use a computer so maybe triumph for DWP but not for many claimants

17:17:43 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

Although people can apply in person with the support of Citizens Advice, and the relevant DWP capacity was freed up by digitising the wider service, which made it more accessible to many people with mobility challenges. The way it coped with the surge during the pandemic put money into people's pockets much quicker than had it not been digitised.

17:08:19 From JuneD to Everyone:

Choice mustn't be taken away, from what I have picked up talking to many people about AI they are scared that they'll be more isolation, loneliness and everything will be a lonely world "run by robots" (Peoples Panel participant)

17:08:58 From Ben Welby to Everyone:

There's been a lost decade (or more) in not having been able to bridge between what's being done centrally/nationally and the complementary role of local authorities and libraries. Even thinking about register to vote and all the plaudits that gets, I think there's a whole hidden world behind that at the local level.

17:09:33 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

Without wishing to do endless self promotion, my colleague Dominique Barron has written an excellent primer on digital exclusion, which really explores the nuances of digital exclusion - it really isn't a binary issue - scroll to the bottom of this page

<https://www.promisingtrouble.net/community-connectivity>

17:12:26 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Brilliant work being done by Promising Trouble, a refreshing and challenging new voice in the digital inclusion space

17:12:25 From Natasha McCarthy to Everyone:

As part of thinking about how digital services can be locally focused, it would be interesting to look at how well different parts of the UK are able to access or connect the data needed to do this well. For example, larger cities (esp London) have the data infrastructure to enable smart and connected transport services; other parts do not, because the ways that existing public transport services are fragmented and the providers may be not be incentivised to share data.

17:14:09 From David to Everyone:

The "local digital" discussion is certainly in the zeitgeist. Public Digital are running an open session on that topic starting in about an hour...

17:14:10 From Terence Eden to Everyone:

This is what Our Future Health (my employer) is already doing. It works well - but is voluntary. And that voluntary nature is critical to retaining trust. People have to be able to opt-in. An opt-out is a sure-fire way to undermine trust.

17:16:40 From Terence Eden to Everyone:

We have to push Labour on this. Their insistence on pushing people into systems without their consent is a real weakness in their political philosophy.

17:17:43 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Trust is the currency of civil society but investment in digital transformation is needed so people on that sector feel more confident and aren't relying on Tech companies to not take advantage of them

17:14:57 From Ben Welby to Everyone:

I worked on the OECD's comparative work and the UK has a great deal to learn from other countries. Yes the UK ranks highly in comparative indices but if you scratch the surface then realistically the story is one of stagnation, if not going backwards on certain things. We can celebrate some good things but I'd argue those are being undermined by weaknesses in data, digital identity and leadership (politically and in the CS). Spinning the wheels on those things isn't helping the already incredibly low levels of public trust that exist in the UK (for all sorts of obvious reasons unconnected from anything to do with tech).

17:15:04 From James to Everyone:

There needs to be a National Data Intermediary in my view

17:15:39 From Jeegar Kakkad to Everyone:

Here's the link to our report on a National Data Trust:

<https://www.institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/a-new-national-purpose-harnessing-data-for-health>

17:15:40 From Miranda Sharp to Everyone:

This is a lovely example of a purpose driven data intermediary; www.lifecycle.je

17:16:29 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

There is fantastic practice happening at local and regional government level on digital inclusion, inclusive approaches to tech etc. Lots to build on

17:17:47 From Haydn Belfield to Everyone:

This report from May calls for "a British Library for Data – a centralised, secure platform to collate high-quality data for scientists and start-ups"

<https://sciencesuperpower.substack.com/p/lets-get-real-about-britains-ai-status>

17:17:51 From Bruce Jackson - ESRC UKRI to Everyone:

On the less conventional data sources - Smart Data Research UK (<https://www.ukri.org>)

17:19:31 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

Some research by Connected by Data on patients and data

<https://connectedbydata.org/resources/our-health-data-stories>

17:19:43 From Ben Lyons to Everyone:

The debates on data and AI policy seem to have become too separated in the last 18 months so this is an important discussion to be having. It would be good to get views from the panel on the role of security for trustworthy public sector data use. This tends to be very high up public concerns:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-attitudes-to-data-and-ai-tracker-survey-wave-3/>

17:20:59 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

There's also an interesting question about the level at which you should create these data institutions. e.g. I could see a case for building out certain institutions at the level of a mission, e.g. a net zero data service, etc. (But I'm sure with overarching technical standards, etc.) The potential for data trusts is also exciting with civil society data - better intelligence to direct funding to where it's most needed, better experience for people interacting with

multiple services, early warning systems on new social problems emerging.

17:26:04 From Mike Riddell to Everyone:

We (<https://thestokemodel.com/>) are working towards the development of a Data Coop which will own and control the memberships data - volunteered personal info - via a PIMS.

17:23:00 From alice to Everyone:

It's fantastic to see so many people who care about these issues. How do we have more conversations at this level? Within government we have various networks but we also need to hear these outside perspectives. I feel like the election has been the catalyst for a large number of events that just weren't happening a few months ago!

17:26:15 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

There are a lot of brilliant, interesting organisations having these conversations, but also a lot of them struggling with funding - civil society needs support to continue to exist and participate - the uncertainty around the election has unfortunately caused many funding sources to grind to a halt. There is a vibrant and important sector with essential insights and information for policy and government, but it needs support

17:24:34 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

Worth saying that often people are shocked and frustrated when they find out that government departments are *not* talking to each other about some of these things.

17:25:17 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Recommend checking out work on data sharing in civil society done by JRF and Data For Action <https://lu.ma/purposefuldistributedgovernance>

17:25:32 From David to Everyone:

In things like this I always ask "where does the conversation continue after?" The only open online forums for this kind of thing are the Civic AI Observatory WhatsApp groups.

17:26:08 From Georgina Langley to Everyone:

Jeni Tennison - could you point towards any of this research? is it published? Really keen to have a look

17:26:32 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

We convene this network for civil society - check it out. Also happy to talk to gov and private sector on participating as guests: <https://data-and-ai-cso-network.org/>

17:27:11 From Gavin Freeguard to Everyone:

We're also exploring public engagement by the public sector on data/AI atm:
<https://connectedbydata.org/projects/2024-mohn-westlake>

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17:27:15 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

Come to Open Data Camp 9 in Manchester July 6-7

<https://www.odcamp.uk/open-data-camp-9-manchester-6-7-july-2024/>

17:27:36 From Kevin Keith to Everyone:

We need to better utilise processes which allow for the co-creation of government policy (of the people, by the people, for the people). Like open government (of which I am an advocate of) which brings reformers together from inside and outside of government. Hence this:

<https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/uk-open-government-network-rebuild-trust-already-exists>

17:27:37 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

My personal view (maybe unpopular!) is that ownership is the wrong concept to apply to data. It's a legacy from a tangible world, not a digital world. Data is often a relationship and often a public good. We should think more in terms of access, use, stewardship, etc.

17:29:21 From Alex Hudson to Everyone:

I think this is an excellent point personally, but there is still a societal debate that needs to be settled (esp wrt training AI) on this. Societal benefit accrues, and it's impossible to avoid bias when opt-anything is available because certain sets will opt in/out.

17:30:43 From Mike Riddell to Everyone:

The value of Intangible digital assets can be underpinned by the value of data and so can be traded as long as they can be owned. Not disagreeing with you here just keen to make sure the community owns its own assets

17:28:08 From Jamie Bernardi to Everyone:

I sporadically run talk events specifically on AI governance - do sign up to the mailing list if you want to hear about the next one. <https://www.ai-governance-talks.com/>

17:28:47 From Jamie Bernardi to Everyone:

(Thanks for all the other links! Checking them out)

17:30:15 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

Agree with that!

17:30:32 From Gavin Freeguard to Everyone:

On positive visions... <https://connectedbydata.org/resources/progressive-vision>

17:30:33 From Pauline Roche to Everyone:

At the lowest common denomination, become a Digital Champion! See Digital Unite.

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17:30:35 From David to Everyone:

Thanks very much everyone

17:30:58 From Adam Cantwell-Corn (he/him) to Everyone:

<https://connectedbydata.us21.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=7c03d6a429375c9cc2eef194f&iid=3c200de804>

17:31:04 From James Plunkett to Everyone:

Packed discussion and thanks for all the questions and chat!

17:31:09 From Cat.Cutmore to Everyone:

Thanks so much everyone, this has been amazing, including input from the chat

17:31:10 From Alex Farley to Everyone:

Really interesting debate - thank you to all the participants

17:31:20 From Natasha McCarthy to Everyone:

Thank you!

17:31:22 From Gavin Freeguard to Everyone:

8pm hustings - digital rights in the age of AI:

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_WJkFEPjkT0icQiQRpkjDEg#/registration

17:31:29 From JuneD to Everyone:

Thank you

17:31:31 From Anna Dent Promising Trouble to Everyone:

thanks very much

17:31:31 From Alex Coley to Everyone:

Thanks All, really interesting discussions

17:31:33 From Kate Jago to Everyone:

Thanks - great and useful

17:31:38 From Christine Adams to Everyone:

Thanks!

17:31:39 From simon cross CofE to Everyone:

thanks all

Meeting closed at 17:32.

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