

## Comparatively Crazy

Written by David Brunnen

Tuesday, 09 February 2010 12:25 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 February 2010 17:59

---



The challenge of explaining new things is often approached by reference to the familiar and identifying the differences. Much of what is presented as 'new' is just an incremental step on a long, often predictable, evolutionary path.

In technological developments we even borrow the language of hereditary science to describe close cousins and their off-spring. We have 3G mobile phone systems and, since 4G is a much-disputed territory, we look towards Long Term Evolution (LTE) – a term that both carries the comfort of the familiar and tries to manage expectations.

The comfortable evolutionary frame similarly applies to public policy. Faced with any apparently new situation the first instinct is to check for precedents – to find some baseline against which fresh ideas can be tested and rules re-measured.

The brave new world of seriously different ways of doing things seems best avoided for as long as possible, incumbents become recumbent, innovation is stifled and 'overnight stars' take several years to show up.

No-one disputes that 'the shock of the new' is pain-free. The descriptor of choice for those who dare to be different is 'disruptive' and, for technologies that really are breaking new ground, no amount of dressing up in old-world language will hide the painful reality that this beast behaves differently.

In developing public policy, particularly around dynamic technological developments, it is dangerous to rest too heavily on the past and ignore the potential prospects of ground-breaking innovation. Leap-frog may nowadays be discouraged on 'health and safety' grounds but the old school playground provided plenty of opportunities for lessons in life. Being behind is no barrier to leadership if you can summon the energy and courage to leap ahead.

It is said that pioneers are 'the guys with arrows in their backs' and there's always a timing judgement to be made in the innovation stakes. The first over the line is not always the out-right winner. Exhausted and concussed by head-banging against brick walls you can see others leaping across the rubble with a cheery

## Comparatively Crazy

Written by David Brunnen

Tuesday, 09 February 2010 12:25 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 February 2010 17:59

---

wave of thanks.

But the advantages are not entirely owned by followers because, in the crazily chaotic pace of technological races, it is rarely possible to recapture the lead from those who moved early and have learned more, more quickly.

The followers do, however, have one small advantage. They can change the rules, reframe the debate and be decisive in casting off the old clothes – and it's easier to be a bit braver when a few others have taken the plunge, or seen the light at the end of the fibre.

So, given [today's stark evidence](#) that others have yet again stolen a march, we should more-easily be able to abandon the comfortable pretence that putting a single hair-like fibre into every home and business (and how that thin thread can be used) has any connection with the stuff we once did with old copper wires and co-axial cables. S  
Some, a few, things may be conceptually similar but for the most-part we must move to a very different place.

Beyond broadband is a completely different world of connectivity – measured not so much by speed in one direction as by the number of different things provided in different ways that can all be done at the same time. This multi-application and multi-service provision is possible once we understand that the out-dated notion that a tied relationship between access provision and the *use* of that access, (or between ownership of the *channel* and ownership of *services*)  
, is not just invalid but also an inhibition to progress.

There is no point in legislating for headline Megabits of download speed when what really matters is concurrent VPN channels, lower latency, reduced jitter, lower packet loss, greater symmetry, lower contention ratios, open service competition, low-cost locally-relevant services, rapid leap-frogging investment in high-performance distribution networks and local access infrastructures, and, above all, the economic and societal development that flows from new freedoms to do more things very differently.

Open Access FTTH is not an optional luxury. No more crazy comparators or super-fast superlatives. The next generation game is up -  
even though for most of the UK the last generation never made it.

## Comparatively Crazy

Written by David Brunnen

Tuesday, 09 February 2010 12:25 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 February 2010 17:59

---

---

The author is Managing Editor of Groupe Intellex.

For retro-reading see also ['Beyond Pipe Dreams'](#) (June 2008)