

**Sir DAVID PUTTNAM, CBE**  
SPEAKING AT  
**THE 'LIFT' LAUNCH**

**BAFTA**

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I'm delighted to be asked to participate in this morning's event.

Despite all the hype, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we are in the midst of an information revolution. And like any other revolution this one contains just as many possibilities for social division and economic injustice as it offers possibilities for a new and better society.

LIFT has been established to address, in an entirely practical way, the need to make this a revolution in which everyone has an opportunity to benefit. By any reckoning that's a task that's likely to be as daunting as it is urgent; and as urgent as it is honourable. I wish Jacquie Disney and Maggie Holgate, and their colleagues, every possible success, and I very much hope they will continue to enjoy the close and positive support from industry which I know they've already won in spades.

May I also say that I am delighted that this event is taking place here at BAFTA. As an institution BAFTA has long been a unique and valuable point of convergence between the film and television industries. Now that convergence is spreading much wider, embracing new technologies and new partners. It is a process I wholeheartedly welcome and which I genuinely believe can lead to a richer and more stimulating future for all of us.

In 1949 the magazine 'Popular Mechanics' confidently prophesied that by the end of the century it would be possible to build computers so compact that they would weigh less than a ton and a half. Well, they were right - in a way! It's my experience that when you add in the leads, cables, transformers, modems and spare batteries the average laptop still comes out at, if anything, a shade over a ton and a half!

But the point of my story is to demonstrate the foolishness of making any bold predictions in the field of information technology. So, instead of starting with a prediction I'm going to start by referring to another, earlier communications revolution, 150 years ago - the railways.

The early railways were little more than a novelty - an exotic form of travel for the adventurous and the wealthy. What turned them into a genuinely mass form of transport, and guaranteed their future significance in British society was one very simple piece of Parliamentary legislation. This required every public railway to run trains, on a daily basis, and at appropriate times, to enable "working men" to travel to and from their places of work at a flat fare of a penny a mile.

And perhaps the second most significant moment in the development of the railways coincided with the Great Exhibition of 1851.

Throughout that summer the price of admission to the Exhibition was progressively reduced until it was well within the reach of ordinary working men and their families. At that point the new railway companies hit on a truly spectacular marketing stunt - the package tour. With one ticket, and at a single, all-in price, you could travel from as far afield as, say, Bristol to Paddington, get a bus to Hyde Park, visit the Exhibition and return home the same evening. Families for whom the very idea of a long-distance journey had never been anything other than an expensive nightmare suddenly found their horizons radically and permanently altered.

For me, the remarkable thing about these two transforming moments in the history of the railways is that neither of them owed anything at all to technology. The trains and the tracks were already there. What changed was not the technology but, in one case, the ambition of government and, in the other, the attitude of ordinary people.

Is that not precisely the situation that confronts us today, in the midst of a new and possibly even more fundamental revolution in communications? The technology of the information revolution is already here. The trains and the tracks are in place. But if we're to go any way at all towards realising its truest and fullest potential we need an ambitious programme of social engineering by government, and some radically new horizons for consumers and industry alike.

There can be little doubt that the information revolution is inextricably bound up with education. The individuals who are most likely to make something of themselves in this new age will be those who understand and embrace that realisation most effectively, and at every stage of their lives. And the nations that are most likely to prosper will be those which recognise it as an essential right and requirement for all their citizens.

It's also probably true to say that in this process of change the focus of education, in some respects at least, will cease to be the teacher and will become instead the learner. Education won't be a matter of pouring already acquired knowledge into young and empty heads so much as enabling people to acquire the skills of exploration, 'navigation' in the current jargon; to become in many respects their own educators.

Nor can the word 'learner' be taken simply as a euphemism for 'school pupil'. It will mean the teacher and the parent just as much as the child; it will mean the redundant middle-aged professional, or the pensioner with time on their hands.

None of that implies that the role of the teacher, or the school, will be any the less important. On the contrary, any serious long-term strategy to develop information technology in the service of education must start with teachers, and with the realities and pressures of school life. Teachers need to feel competent and on top of the technology. Of course they do. If they're not, they won't use it. That carries huge and urgent implications for teacher training.

But equally, the technology must bring tangible added value to their teaching, not added gimmicks and added headaches. That in turn presupposes content creators working with teachers to devise the most effective and useful materials; and teachers working with content creators to develop the most effective and useful exploitation of the technology's potential.

Unless teachers become the champions of this change, unless they embrace it as practical means of enhancing and facilitating their role, there is every likelihood that the information revolution will simply pass schools by.

Consider the consequences. The consumer market for PC-based educational material is already growing fast, and its marketing is becoming ever more attractive. But much of the material is pitched in a no-man's land somewhere between education and entertainment - with just enough action to appeal to the kids and just enough education to persuade the parents to part with their money; which means there is also likely to be just enough scepticism from teachers to dismiss it and, in the process, reinforce the pupils' prejudice that school is, as ever, lagging far behind the times.

That mis-match of expectations would, of course, only apply to the minority of households, albeit a significant and growing minority, who own and use computers. At the other end of the spectrum lies the danger of an equally damaging mis-match between a school environment in which the use of computers is the norm and a home environment in which their use remains a complete mystery.

So while it may be true to say that education is at the heart of the information revolution, it is equally and emphatically true that the revolution can only succeed if there is some common understanding and common ambition to link what goes on in our educational institutions with what goes on in the world outside.

Of course, however successfully we manage the process, mistakes are going to be made, and no doubt many false dawns will be announced. Just as happened with the railways of Victorian Britain it is probably a fair bet to expect that progress will be as much by sudden breakthroughs in perception as by any steady and systematic advance.

The good news, which it is all too easy to forget, is that we in Britain already have a pretty creditable track record. Pilot projects up and down the country are building up a valuable and ever-expanding expertise not just in schools but in libraries, in higher education and in a wide variety of community-based settings. We are blessed, too, with some of the most innovative and imaginative content creators in the world, many of whom are represented here this morning.

LIFT is going to make an important contribution to that already solid foundation. I have no doubt it is going to play a vital role in helping us all, whoever we may be - teachers, parents, public policy-makers, or professionals working in the industry to continue to be 'learners' in the true sense of the word, exploring new ways of ensuring that this information revolution helps us to build a more prosperous, stable and stimulating society for all the people of Britain.