

An interview with keynote speaker, Claire Milne

This year our keynote speaker for the [ACCAN National Conference](#) is Claire Milne, MBE, Visiting Senior Fellow, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics.

Claire will bring a wealth of knowledge to the ACCAN Conference. She has worked in the telecoms sector since 1975 and held a series of management jobs within BT, including teletraffic theory, exchange and network design and regulation. Since 1989, she has been a consultant, first with Ovum and then in her own company Antelope Consulting. She has been a Visiting Senior Fellow at LSE since 2003. From 2008 - 2014 she chaired the Consumer Forum for Communications at Ofcom.

We interviewed Claire to get insights into her views on communications affordability in the lead up to the ACCAN Conference.

What are the most common barriers to getting connected to the internet?

Several barriers commonly crop up, including: “too expensive”, “don’t need” (often indicating unawareness of the value internet can provide), “too difficult” (which may relate to actual or perceived problems). These can be hard to sort out from each other – for example, people may say the internet is of little use to them when they mean that they have more important ways of spending their limited budgets; or they may say they can’t afford the internet when they don’t realise, or don’t want to say, that they are afraid to try. Which barriers matter most naturally varies from person to person, among social groups and by country.

Which solutions work best to solve telecommunications affordability issues? (For example: social tariffs, low-cost packages, industry wide initiatives, government. allocation of minimum broadband connections with pensions, telco vouchers).

As you might guess from the previous answer, there’s no single answer to this one either. And in the UK (I suspect also elsewhere), the issue is largely un-researched. But to offer a few general observations:

- Social tariffs often have low take-up, partly because they aren’t well-known among their target group, and partly because people prefer mainstream offerings, which have minimum bureaucracy and no stigma attached.
- Vouchers or similar approaches may be more popular among economists than among the public. Some people would rather make their own decision what to spend money on.
- A recent study for the US regulator of several different approaches to getting low income people online found that in general, take-up of even free services was well below expected levels. People were also reluctant to sign up for free digital literacy classes.

So my personal favourite approach is that the market (encouraged by back-up regulation) should provide a wide range of options, including some that will appeal to and be affordable by people on very slim budgets.

In Australia previous research has shown that 50 per cent of those on low-incomes cannot afford internet access. In your experience, is this the case in many countries?

It's hard to compare numbers from research in different countries, when terms like "low income" aren't interpreted the same way, and research approaches differ too. But it's usual for internet take-up to be much lower among lower income groups, and for affordability to be a big reason for this (along with other factors, as we said before). Research for the UK regulator a couple of years ago found that internet affordability was most likely to be a problem in families with school age children. A study of broadband non-adoption in California from 2010 found the largest percentage (36%) of non-adopters citing cost as the main reason. And take-up isn't always a good guide to affordability. In the words of a respondent from a recent Canadian study: "Home internet...is already way too much, but I need it, so I pay it".

In the UK, the Government has moved many services online. Are there many people who can't afford to access these services? How does the Government deal with these sorts of issues?

In the UK, there's been a big push for "digital inclusion", mostly aiming to give people who aren't online (who are predominantly older) the basic skills they need to benefit from internet use. As a result, most of the 4 million homes now without broadband don't have it because the people living there think they don't need it, rather than because it's too expensive.

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