Together for a Fair Climate Future

Event 5 Summary: Can technology be a force for good in delivering a fair climate future?

08 June 2021, 1:00 – 2:15pm

Live event illustration: William Bock – Visual Scribe

Can technology be a force for good in delivering a fair climate future? explored the role of digital technology in action on the climate crisis and social justice. The event looked at both how technology can mobilise change and empower people to act, but also how to overcome any barriers and the risks of our increasing reliance on digital technologies. The event discussed breaking out of echo chambers, tackling digital exclusion and building digital and media literacy, protecting and using data to facilitate the transition to net zero, and reducing the negative climate and social impacts of technology itself.

The ideas in this document are those of the panellists and video contributors – full credit must be attributed to them. Find out more about the speakers at the end of this summary.

9 Action Points

As we move to a more digital society, tackling issues of digital exclusion and digital literacy must be a priority, so no one is left behind. 5.3 million UK adults are not internet users, and particular groups are more digitally excluded than others, such as people who are unemployed. In addition, people who are digitally excluded (alongside private renters) are the group least likely to benefit from changes in future energy markets. Everyone must be supported to be able to get the information they need to

participate fully in society and the energy transition and there needs to be a greater focus on digital literacy as an equity issue.

Digital technology can empower action on climate and social justice, enabling people to come together to create real change. Technology enables individuals and groups to connect with others in their communities and around the world. Technology can make it easier to learn from what others are doing, to see success stories, to support each other, and to rapidly build communities. The youth climate strikes are a prime example, having mobilised 15,000 people through social media for their first strike in the UK.

> " *Social media can be used to unite people for a common cause, […] but it needs to be balanced. […] Misinformation actually spreads quicker and wider than real news. […] It is a great tool, but it needs to be used in the right way* – Marcus Smith "

Use a range of mediums and connect with people with many different perspectives to break out of echo chambers. Social media algorithms create echo chambers by largely feeding us content it knows we will 'like' and agree with, rather than content that might challenge or make us think differently. To break out of these echo chambers, follow people and read things that you don't necessarily agree with and engage with communities offline. Use a range of mediums, beyond social media, to creatively connect with people in different ways e.g. radio, comic books, posters, storytelling.

> " *To break out of these echo chambers, you have to think outside the box, and not focus on the techniques that you've been using before* – Cyrus Jarvis "

A greater focus on media literacy could give people the tools to challenge echo chambers and misinformation. Misinformation can spread quicker and wider than real news on social media. People need to be better supported to think critically about the content they consume, including checking sources and wider media literacy. Creatives can play a role in this, by using art, music, and other creative mediums, to demystify data and make it more accessible.

> " *Media literacy is so important, because if you don't have a set of tools to even interrogate the idea of an echo chamber, then you will never be able to get out* – Chris Adams "

Digital communications and household technologies can empower people to take action at home, but they need to be accessible. Technologies such as smart meters, energy efficient appliances, and renewable energy trackers can enable people to have more control at home, such as over their energy consumption. However, smart tech in the home will only be successful if everyone can access it. Technology needs to be inclusive by design – recognising the diversity of users, being innovative yet fair and accessible to all.

> " *Mak[e] sure that new energy technologies for people and for homes are affordable and accessible, and that they are accompanied by rigorous consumer protections – Dhara Vyas* "

Data is key in the transition to net zero, but its use must be clear and transparent for consumers and supported by rigorous protections.
Technological changes, essential for the transition to net zero, are often underpinned by data – from reducing energy consumption to producing energy in new ways. In addition, data can also be used to help people in vulnerable circumstances, ensuring people get better support and tailoring services to their needs. However, consumers have concerns about the use of their data, which must be resolved through data protection and greater transparency, accessibility, and control.

> " *Data is going to be essential if we want to meet the net zero targets … Technological changes are all underpinned by data, and they're key to the transition – Dhara Vyas* "

Technology itself needs to be designed in line with the goals of a fair climate future. Technology has a huge social and environmental impact – from the use of energy, water, and raw materials to the consumption and waste of technological devices. Technology needs to be designed within ecological limits and reflect ideas of a circular economy. Tech products need to be built to last and be easily repairable. Technology needs to be designed in a way that is inclusive and accessible, as well as easy and intuitive to use.

A change in values towards eco-social justice could support technology to become a force for good. Technology isn't separate from wider social, economic, and political systems. Technology reflects the current values in society, but it is also an accelerator – it speeds up what it already there. For technology to be a force for good, it is important to consider what trends and values it is amplifying. Values of solidarity, eco-social justice, mutual care, and collective action could counter current unsustainable trends.

> " *Tech will not change without continuous consumer, governmental, and employee pressure. That means everyone – consumers, governments, NGOs, and especially tech workers and tech leaders – we all have a role to play in forcing tech to be a force for good – Melissa Hsiung* "

Meaningfully engage the public on issues of technology and climate and social justice to inform policy and decision-making. Everyone needs to play a role in ensuring technology is a force for good for a fair climate future. The Climate Assemblies have shown how bringing people together, making issues accessible, and engaging the public on issues of climate change and net zero can lead to strong recommendations for delivering a fair climate future. Decision makers need to learn from this and meaningfully involve citizens in ensuring a fair transition to net zero and the role of technology in this process.

Panellists

Chris Adams – Co-Director, The Green Web Foundation
Chris Adams is an environmentally focussed tech generalist, spending the last fifteen years working in tech start-ups, blue chip companies and government, as a user researcher, product manager, developer, sysadmin and UX-er. He is an organiser of ClimateAction.tech, a community for technology professionals taking climate action, and a director of the Green Web Foundation.

Cyrus Jarvis – Climate Justice Activist
I'm an Iranian student creative and filmmaker who was one of the founding members of the UK's youth climate strike (Fridays for Future) movement. After our huge success, I worked mostly as a media spokesperson for the movement, the coordinator of our media and graphics operations, and an organiser of the London strikes where I would be found leading the marches. I now focus on my art while continuing my climate work in a personal capacity after dismantling the UK Student Climate Network - by working within the international Fridays for Future network, and writing for Mission Magazine as their environmental editor.

Dhara Vyas – Head of Future Energy Services, Citizens Advice
Dhara leads a team that's focused on putting people at the heart of the transition to net zero. She is responsible for ensuring the consumer voice is heard when it comes to designing and planning the future energy market. Dhara advocates for consumers across a range of issues including decarbonising heat, improving the efficiency of homes, electric vehicles, local area energy, smart homes and energy data. Dhara has worked on energy issues for over a decade, and has a broad range of strategic policy, research and advocacy experience. Prior to this she led a number of different projects that impact on people's lives outside the energy market - including community engagement, local authority scrutiny, localism and devolved budgeting.

Marcus Smith – Media Creative and Journalist, BBC
Marcus is a Media Creative & Journalist based in Bristol, UK. He recently presented a series for BBC Radio 4 on responsible technology with Tristan Harris from Social Dilemma documentary on Netflix and Kriti Sharma on harnessing the good in Artificial Intelligence. He is now producing a podcast series on Green Thinking for BBC and AHRC in the build to the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (Cop26). Marcus is also a Board Trustee at In Between Time, a global producer of contemporary and live art, and is Development Lead at Bristol Community FM.

Video contributors

We are also grateful for video contributions from:

- Leah Borromeo – Director, Disobedient Films
- Michael Briggs – Head of Sustainability, Which?
- Vineeta Greenwood – Co-Founder and Account Director, Wholegrain Digital
- Melissa Hsiung – Co-organizer, ClimateAction.tech
- Tom Jarrett - Designer
- Professor Ann Light – Professor of Design and Creative Technology, University of Sussex and Professor of Interaction Design for Social Change and Sustainability, Malmö University
- Heather Picov – CEO, Apps for Good
- Michelle Tan – Youth Climate Activist
- Tove Westling – Global Strategist, GoClimate