



Rural connectivity

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Research on rural broadband goes global

New research by Northumbria University on methods to tackle the rural digital divide involving local communities in Cumbria has been showcased in front of an international audience of communication policy makers.

Lecturer Paolo Gerli and Professor Jason Whalley based at Northumbria University's Newcastle Business School, were recently in Washington DC to present their research at the prestigious 46th TPRC Research Conference on Communication, Information and Internet Policy.

Based on two examples of rural broadband connectivity schemes operating in the North West of England, their research demonstrates how adopting more innovative business models could successfully bring superfast broadband to some of the world's most isolated communities.

Titled 'Fibre to the Countryside: A Comparison of Public and Community Initiatives in the UK', the study explores how community-led and public initiatives can successfully contribute to promoting the diffusion of superfast broadband by analysing two projects delivering fibre networks in Cumbria.

One is a cooperative fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) network financed and built by local residents. Each community has to aggregate demand and collect enough funding to cover 100% of the premises in the parish. The fibre is then laid by volunteers and landowners are required to consent to free wayleaves.

The second is a public-private partnership between British Telecom and Cumbria County Council, which is one of several projects funded by Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) to install fibre broadband in areas excluded from commercial deployments.

Paolo Gerli explains: "Our research studied both approaches and demonstrates how the pioneering business models used in Cumbria can contribute to bringing superfast broadband to very remote communities which have been struggling with poor connectivity for two decades".

"Whilst the rural digital divide remains an unsolved issue across developed and developing countries, by analysing the interplay between community-led initiatives and public-private partnerships, this research provides useful recommendations for policymakers and practitioners committed to providing everyone with fast connectivity and dealing with the roll-out of rural broadband."

The TPRC Research Conference on Communications, Information and Internet Policy is an annual event which brings together a diverse range of international researchers from academia, industry, government, and non-profit organisations.

The aim is to work together with policy makers and the private sector to share current thinking and challenge ideas on legal, economic, social, and

technical research affecting all aspects of national and international policy on communications, information, and the Internet.

Paolo adds: “Presenting at the conference was a fantastic opportunity for us to discuss our research with academics and practitioners from all over the world. It also provided a global platform to showcase innovative rural broadband initiatives, which have been developed in the North of England to address what is, in fact, a world-wide problem.”

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--- Please contact media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk with any media enquiries or interview requests ---

Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk