

news



Net under threat from apps

The internet could split into factions, a Sheffield-based free software campaigner has warned. His words come as concern grows over how apps – programmes that work on the latest mobile smartphones – are changing the marketplace.

The apps, which include

convenient ways to shop online and platforms to access social networks, often sell for profit despite some making use of information that is accessible for free from a conventional computer. Bloggers and app developers have also raised concerns about the distribution

of free open source applications. They fear that major players in the development of smartphones are reluctant to allow apps that can be shared and modified for free.

James Wallbank, chief executive of AccesSpace, a centre exploring open and free

media, says he fears the internet could fracture into those who want it free and democratic and those who don't mind paying a premium for convenience.

Experience distorted

"The internet will always be free for those who have digital skills and engage with the politics of the net," he said. "If it was ever shut down, they would re-build it as they have an interest in the technicalities.

"Those who just want convenience, however, will find their online experience subtly and almost invisibly distorted. They may see more adverts, their search results may be less helpful and they could find it hard to access some kinds of information.

"In a case where access to alternative news was made inconvenient, this may be distinctly poisonous to democracy. Some will pay with their time to access the free internet and others will pay with money to access a corporate walled garden. Could this be the start of a digital apartheid?"

Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the web, has also warned of the dangers of apps, social media sites like Facebook and programs like iTunes

Manchester University student under fire on return to Chi

A former Manchester University has caused a storm of controversy in her native China after landing a senior management job in a local university at the age of 25.

Wang Shengqi studied in Manchester, where she became president of the Chinese Student Welfare Society, before returning to China and becoming vice-head of Liaoning Petroleum and Chemical University last year.

Her fast-track career has recently been exposed on the internet in China. Wang was then subjected to a so-called "human flesh search engine", a procedure where internet users

band together to unearth every fact they can about a target of popular controversy.

Father is mayor

China's amateur internet detectives soon uncovered what they say is the real reason for Wang's rapid promotion. Her father is the mayor of the north east Chinese city in which the university is based.

Official corruption is a major issue in China and Wang was subjected to a torrent of criticism across the Sinosphere.

The Liaoning Petroleum university rapidly came to her defence, saying her experience at Manchester meant that she

had the "high level foreign talent" necessary for the vice-head's job.

A statement later appeared under Wang's name on the internet. It said: "My father is indeed one of Liaoning's mayors; I am not dodging this point. Some people say I am the offspring of the powerful. But I have no choice in this. My father is mayor – is this so wrong?"

"I am really quite upset!" the statement added.

For angry Chinese citizens, the case sums up much that is wrong with the system. Even her spell at Manchester was looked on with suspicion.

Around 5,000 Chinese students start courses in British universities every year. According to figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, as of 2008 there were 75,000 students from the People's Republic of China attending courses at British schools, universities and colleges.

Studying abroad

For universities and colleges in the UK and elsewhere, students from China are a welcome and lucrative addition. But for many people in China, they are proof of embedded official privilege. Cadres send their children

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News in brief

undermining the principle of the internet as being a “single, universal information space”.

“Open standards drive innovation,” he said, and the growth of apps for smartphones such as the iPhone is “disturbing”.

Free information

But fledgling apps developers said they had few concerns over apps destroying the internet.

“While I use services with ad support, such as Facebook, I also use free resources like Wikipedia, and never really consider the differences,” said Oliver Harris, creative director at West Yorkshire-based app developers Noisybadger.com. “Mobile computing, which includes paid-for apps and new ways to access the more traditional free internet, should not be seen as opposing access to free information but instead as a convenient, new way to access established information sources.”

As the debate continues, it remains to be seen how the future will pan out. However it seems certain that, whether for democracy or shopping, one question will remain: “Is there an app for that?”

KEVIN CAMPBELL-WRIGHT

China hometown

abroad for an enjoyable period of study before parachuting them into good jobs back home. And so-called “naked officials” have become notorious for sending their children abroad on the pretext of studying, but actually to pave the way for the family as a whole escaping with the proceeds of corruption.

Though notorious for its wide ranging controls on the internet, there is some evidence that the Communist Party welcomes or at least tolerates informal exposés of its own officials – provided they are not too high ranking.

JAMIE KENNY

Rugby league takes lead against homophobia



Players Mitchell Stringer and Corey Hanson flank MP Stephen Gilbert

Sheffield Eagles have joined forces with the Rugby Football League to make a stand against homophobia.

At their opening game of the 2011 Co-operative Championship season against Widnes last they wore a kit displaying the slogan “Homophobia: Tackle It”.

Sheffield Eagles are the first professional club in mainstream UK sport to display such a high level of support for the anti-homophobia campaign.

Outstanding example

The RFL became the first sports organisation to be named as a LGBT-friendly employer following the recognition of Super League player Gareth Thomas, the Crusaders forward who was named as 2010 Stonewall LGBT Hero of The Year after coming out in 2009.

“I am delighted that rugby league has taken the positive, progressive step of publicly embracing diversity and condemning prejudice,” said TV broadcaster Claire Balding. “I hope other sports will follow the outstanding example set by

the RFL. Congratulations and, on a personal note – thank you.”

Recently, England cricketer Steven Davies came out, suggesting that the sporting world is becoming more accepting of gay people.

Support for campaign

Actor Scott Haining (*Waterloo Road*), and Lib Dem politician Lynne Featherstone have also shown their support for the Eagles’ campaign.

The Eagles’ kit was jointly funded by LGBT History Month and Pride Sports, with backing from the University and College Union and the National Union of Teachers.

Sue Sanders, co-chair of LGBT History Month, said: “We have scraped all our pennies together to buy these shirts for the game. It means so much to us to have a professional club want to do something to tackle homophobia.”

Featherstone added: “I am delighted to support this fantastic occasion with the RFL and Sheffield Eagles

RHIANNON SEGAR

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Leeds City Council has agreed to hand over the lease of the Cardigan Centre in Burley to the community group that has successfully run it for 22 years. As well as engaging in community work, the centre runs a resource centre and is a registered charity. The council agreed that it would be appropriate to sublet the building to the group at a nominal rent for the 77 years remaining on the lease.

PLAYWRIGHTS WANTED

Zion Arts Centre is offering an opportunity for six talented writers aged 16-25 to work with award-winning North West playwright and performance poet Gerry Potter to develop an original script for a play to celebrate the Zion building’s centenary year. The Zion 100 Young Writers project begins with a four-day workshop in April, with the play performed in October. For more information contact liz@zionarts.com.

NHS DEBATE

Leeds citizens are invited to a free conference to discover what NHS changes mean for them. Hospital Alert, a campaign group that works to defend the NHS, is concerned the government is introducing major changes without giving people a chance to find out what’s happening. The conference on 19 March at St Chad’s Centre, Otley Road will be an opportunity to learn about and debate the changes. Registration essential: email info@leedshospitalalert.org.uk.

CINEMA FOR GAZA

20 March is the date for a rare screening of the 1962 Oscar-winning film *Lawrence of Arabia* in York to raise funds for UK charity Medical Aid for Palestinians. The project is a response to the humanitarian disaster affecting people living in Gaza and the West Bank and the high incidence of burns injuries in the area, for which local hospitals are inadequately equipped. The screening is at Reel Cinema. Tickets are £7. Phone 01509 221155.