Britain seeks to become world's 'digital capital'

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Britain on Tuesday declared a goal to become the world's "digital capital" by building cutting-edge broadband, telecoms and media infrastructure to cement its role as a "global economic powerhouse".

Prime Minister Gordon Brown compared the digital revolution to the 19th century construction of roads and railways which laid the foundations for the Industrial Revolution in Britain.

Although it currently trails many countries in criteria such as broadband penetration and mobile phone usage, Brown said Britain could leapfrog into the global lead.

"Britain is going to lead the world. This is us taking the next step into the future, being the digital capital of the world," he said before the publication of the long-awaited "Digital Britain" report later Tuesday.

The report will set out wide-ranging aims for Britain's media and communications industries, tackling issues including illegal downloading and helping broadcasters and newspapers respond to the ongoing digital revolution.

One long-contentious issue is the BBC, which critics say unfairly benefits from public funding. Reports at the weekend suggested there could be a shake-up of the licence fee, the levy which everyone has to pay to fund the broadcaster.

Brown, who visited a media firm in southeast London ahead of the launch, said high-speed broadband access would be as essential in the future as gas, electricity or water are now.

Writing in the Times newspaper, Brown added that digital technology can help Britain emerge stronger from the current global downturn, which has hit London harder than some cities due to its dependence on banking and financial services.

"Just as the bridges, roads and railways built in the 19th century were the foundations of the Industrial Revolution... so investment now in the information and communications industries can underpin our emergence from recession... and cement the UK's position as a global economic powerhouse," he said.

"Modernisation of our communications infrastructure is vital to take advantage of important shifts in technology," Brown added.

"Broadband is at a tipping point. High-speed Internet access will soon be essential for everyone. Only a digital Britain can unlock the imagination and creativity that will secure for us and our children the high-skilled jobs of the future in a global economy."

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