[GB] Inquiry into Audio-visual Communications and the Regulation of Broadcasting

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The Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the House of Commons is currently conducting an inquiry into the future regulation of television and radio in the light of convergence between broadcasting, telecommunications and computer technologies. In launching its inquiry the Select Committee has set out to explore a number of questions, ranging from the nature of technological changes affecting audio-visual communications and broadcasting, to the impact of those technological changes on the structure of communications regulation in the UK. The inquiry does not examine in detail the operation of current individual broadcasting organisations, but the Committee will undertake another inquiry into the organisation and financing of the BBC before the end of the current five-year financial settlement in 2002. The inquiry has led to a large debate and the publication of a wide range of submissions. The responses of the two main regulators involved, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Office of Telecommunications has now also made public. In its written evidence, the ITC, foresees a continuining need for the regulation of television programme services. It states that if viewers' are to be served well in the age of digital television, regulators need to: regulate content both to provide viewer protection, and by positive programme requirements ensure high quality and diverse programme services on the universal access free to air terrestrial channels licensed by the ITC;

- regulate the broadcasting market place to prevent major players form abusing their market position; regulate ownership where necessary to keep diversity and plurality in the provision of television programme services; and,

- regulate technology in support of open technical standards, to ensure that in their acquisition of television receiving equipment viewers can exercise clear, straightforward choices at reasonable cost. It concludes that a single regulator for telecommunications and broadcaster responsible to two sponsoring Departments would not work (para 52).

OFTEL's (the UK's Office of Telecommunications) initial evidence to the Committee concentrates on the technological background and policy issues which it believes Government should decide as it paves the way for UK consumers and industry to get the most out of revolutionary developments in broadcasting, telecoms and information technology, including the Internet. It stresses the importance of

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deciding what the policy objectives should be. OFTEL's view is that communications technology is changing so fast, that the UK's policy for exploiting the opportunities must be flexible enough to deal with future change. The second part of its evidence, to be presented to the Committee shortly, will concentrate on how the converged communications market could be regulated.

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