[GB] Plans for Analogue Switch Off and Possible Streamlining of Regulation

IRIS 1999-9:1/29

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The British Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who has the main responsibility for broadcasting policy, has made an important speech stating Government policy on analogue switch-off and future regulation. He has set a number of key tests to be met before analogue switch-off can take place. These are that:

- everyone who now receives free to air analogue channels must be able to receive them digitally. This is a figure of 99.4% of the population;

- 95% of consumers must have digital equipment;

- the digital equipment must be affordable by the vast majority of the population, including those on low and fixed incomes and older people. This is to apply to video recorders as well as to television receivers

- all current free to air channels, including BBC1, BBC2, ITV and Channels 4 and 5 must be available free on digital television.

These appear demanding conditions; currently there are 1.5 million digital subscribers in the UK. However the Secretary of State was optimistic that switchover could commence as early as 2006 and be completed by 2010. A firm date will be set when 70% of consumers have access to digital equipment. Progress will be monitored every two years and a Viewers' Panel set up to offer advice. The statement was welcomed by the digital television broadcasters as creating a clearer framework for switchover.

The Secretary of State also suggested that new legislation could be introduced in the medium term to reform broadcasting regulation. It could lift unnecessary legislative requirements and rationalise the different regulatory bodies, though not necessarily replacing them with a single `super-regulator'. He re-emphasised, however, the continuing importance of public service broadcasting, especially for the BBC but also for Channels 3 and 4 and indicated that they will continue to be required to offer a diversity of viewpoints.

Chris Smith Sets Out Timetable for Digital Revolution, Department for Culture, Media and Sport Press Release 245/999, 17 September 1999.

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