[GB] Government Gives Qualified Approval to New BBC Digital Services

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The British Culture Secretary has announced her longawaited decision on the BBC's proposals for four new digital television channels and five new digital radio services. Government approval is needed for the BBC to vary the number or geographical coverage of its services. Guidelines drawn up by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport set out conditions for such approval relating to the nature of the new services and the procedure for consultation on them to be adopted by the BBC. The proposals were especially controversial as they were strongly opposed by rival commercial broadcasters as duplicating their own services whilst benefiting from public funding through the BBC licence fee.

The proposed new television services were two new television channels for children (one for those under six years old and one for those aged six to thirteen); a service for sixteen to thirty-four year olds (the "youth channel") and a television service specialising in culture, arts and ideas. The radio services were aimed at a young specialist audience, an Asian audience and sports fans, together with archive music and voice channels. All services were to be available free-to-air and would carry no advertising.

The Culture Secretary approved all the services with the exception of the youth channel. In relation to the latter, she considered that it did not have a distinctive character as a number of commercial broadcasters provide services to this audience. She invited the BBC to draw up new plans for an alternative service. This decision was a particular disappointment to the BBC as this was to have been the most heavily funded of the new services, and the youth audience is the one which has been most heavily drawn away from the BBC to commercial channels.

All the other proposals were considered to be distinctive and to have clear public service value. They will also serve the Government's general goal of promoting digital broadcasting. They were approved subject to conditions, for example requiring a high proportion of EU/EEA programming and a mixed programming schedule, including material which educates and informs as well as entertainment. They are to be subject to periodic review by the Culture Secretary.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Press Release 244/01, 13 September 2001, "Tessa Jowell Announces Decision on Proposed New

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BBC Digital Services"

http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative/search.asp?Name=/pressreleases/creative/2001/dcms244

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