[GB] Regulator Publishes Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting

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Tony Prosser
University of Bristol Law School

The UK communications regulator, Ofcom, has published the results of phase 1 of its review of public service television broadcasting. It is required to undertake such a review at least every five years under section 264 of the Communications Act 2003 (see IRIS 2003-8: 10), which also defines the overall public service remit of broadcasters. The review includes the BBC as well as the commercial public service broadcasters. In the first phase, Ofcom considered the current position of public service broadcasting, including how effective the main terrestrial channels are in providing it, and offered initial propositions on how it can be maintained and strengthened. Firm proposals will be produced in phase 2 later in 2004.

Ofcom found that a wide range of subjects was covered by broadcasters and that high-quality, accurate and unbiased news and information services were provided. However, more specialist programmes on subjects such as arts, current affairs and religion were pushed out of peak viewing hours, and spending on arts, children's, religious and education programmes had fallen. Channels relied instead on programmes with more obvious popular appeal.

The audience for the main terrestrial channels had fallen from 87% in 1998 to 76% in 2003, and from 63% to 57% in multichannel homes (except for those with digital terrestrial television, where the share stayed at around 85%). Viewing figures were lower for some audience groups, notably younger and non-white audiences. Some of the more serious and challenging programme types were those most affected by multichannel competition.

Despite the falls in viewing figures, a survey of viewers' attitudes found that they still valued wider social purposes in broadcasting, especially for news and information and for providing a wide range of programmes across the schedules; programmes dealing specifically with minority interests were less valued.

The review noted that increased competition is likely to reduce funds for meeting public service obligations and market failures will be reduced due to greater choice of programmes. However, public service broadcasting will still be required to provide information, reflect cultural identity, stimulate interest in arts, science and history and reflect the lives of different communities. It should be defined by its purpose and characteristics rather than by specific programme types, and regulation should break away from narrow obligations specifying particular types

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of programmes. Funding for public service broadcasting could be distributed in new ways, for example by allowing broadcasters or producers to bid for a share of it. Although the BBC should continue to deliver a wide range of activities, there should be an examination of new methods of funding for them, such as subscription, and a review of other BBC activities such as studio and production resources. All BBC programmes should reflect the broad purposes and character of public service broadcasting. Finally, after digital switchover, public intervention to secure public service broadcasting may not be justified on its present scale, either because of a reduction of market failures or because it will be impossible to achieve the purposes of public service broadcasting through television.

Ofcom, "Ofcom Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting: Phase 1 Is Television Special?", April 2004

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations/current/psb/psb.pdf?a=87101

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