[GB] Regulator Sets Out Proposals for Future of Public Service Broadcasting

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The Office of Communications (Ofcom), the UK communications regulator, has issued the final report of its second Public Service Broadcasting Review. It is obliged by the Communications Act 2003 to undertake such a review at least every five years; this follows an earlier report setting out options for the future (see IRIS 2008-10: 12).

The Review focused on how to ensure the delivery of content which fulfils public purposes and meets the interests of citizens and consumers throughout the UK, aiming to make recommendations which responded to the huge changes brought about by the transition to the digital era and which would ensure that a historically strong and successful public service broadcasting system can move to the new digital environment. This includes public service broadcasters embracing new digital platforms, so that public service content is available across all digital media, not just linear broadcasting. The transition to the digital era is undermining the current model for delivering public service content outside the BBC through increased competition and decline in advertising revenues, so Ofcom considers that a new approach is needed.

Ofcom considers that it is essential to retain a strong BBC with funding to deliver its core services across digital platforms. A second institution, operating independently of the BBC and with clear public service goals, will help to ensure wide availability of digital content. This is likely to be based on Channel 4 in partnership, joint venture or even merged with other organisations. The most likely collaboration is with BBC Worldwide, the BBC's commercial arm, although a further possibility is a merger of Channel 4 with Channel 5.

Other commercially-owned networks, notably ITV, will retain only a modest public service commitment to UK original content and to UK and international news; Ofcom is immediately lifting some of ITV's public service obligations. To sustain news for the regions and devolved nations of the UK, independently funded consortia should bid for public funding; the government should also consider funding for other content in the devolved nations and for children's programming.

The report has now gone to ministers, who will take the ultimate decisions; Ofcom states that decisions will be needed within the next year as the current model of commercial public service broadcasting is clearly no longer sustainable. Changes

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to Channel 4’s remit will require legislation.

Ofcom, ‘Putting Viewers First: Ofcom’s Second Public Service Broadcasting Review’, January 2009

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb2_phase2/statement/

Ofcom, Statement on Short Term Regulatory Decisions

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb2_phase2/shortterm/

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