[GB] Government Publishes “Digital Britain” Proposals

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The UK Government has published “Digital Britain - Final Report” setting out its proposals on a wide range of communications issues. Its basic aim is “to secure the UK’s position as one of the world’s leading digital knowledge economies”.

A number of proposals directly concern the broadcasting sector. The Government has rejected privatisation of Channel 4, but its statutory remit will be updated and discussions will continue on a strategic partnership between Channel 4 and BBC Worldwide, the Corporation’s commercial arm. The Government will consult on a “Contained Contestable Element” of the television licence fee, currently used only to fund the BBC. This would be used to fund “independently-financed news consortia” to provide multi-media and broadcast regional news independently of the BBC, using the Channel 3 broadcast regional news slots. The new arrangements would replace the provision of such news by Channel 3, which is finding it increasingly difficult to meet public service obligations due to increased competition from digital media and a decline in advertising revenue. Other public service obligations on Channel 3 may also be relaxed and the general direction will be one of gradual liberalisation. The funding proposal is bitterly opposed by the BBC, which sees it as a threat to its own independence by breaching the distinction between the licence fee and general taxation.

The Report also includes other major proposals across a range of different media. Digital switchover is proposed for all national radio stations by the end of 2015. The Government has assured it will deliver a commitment to universal broadband at 2Mbps by 2012. This will be achieved by a mix of technologies and will be supported by public funding. After that date, next generation networks will be made universally available with at least 90% coverage by 2017 funded by a levy of 50 pence per month on all fixed copper lines. The Communications Act 2003 will also be amended to add to the principal duties of the regulator, Ofcom, a duty to promote investment in communications infrastructure.

Ofcom will be given new functions aimed at reducing copyright infringement on the Internet. It will require Internet service providers to notify account holders of alleged copyright infringement and to maintain and make available, after a court order, data to allow serious repeat offenders to be identified. This will be underpinned by an industry code of practice, though Ofcom may impose a code if agreement is not reached. It will also have the power to impose additional conditions on service providers, including blocking, should other measures not be

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effective in reducing unlawful file sharing.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 'Digital Britain - Final Report', Cm 7650, June 2009

http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/digitalbritain-finalreport-jun09.pdf

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