[GB] Media Convergence and Broadcasting Impartiality

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The House of Lords Communications Committee released its report on Media Convergence on 19 March 2013. The report focused on the increasing convergence of different media including television and broadcasting, and the traditional print media, in large part due to technological advances, particularly the Internet. The report highlighted the fact that the lines that had previously delineated these areas, to some extent, are becoming increasingly blurred. Newspapers through video content, and broadcasters through written, are using the Internet to encroach upon the traditional territories of each other. The Committee noted that this evolution is creating a plethora of new challenges and opportunities for content creators, audiences and regulators.

The Committee, in the report, touches on a number of different issues and makes several important recommendations, but perhaps the most notable is the observation that at some point in the future it may be necessary to reassess or abandon the requirements of impartiality currently incumbent upon all news broadcasters in the United Kingdom. It has been a requirement since the advent of broadcasting in this jurisdiction that news content is delivered in a way that is impartial and accurate; this is currently enshrined in both the Ofcom (The Office of Communications) Broadcasting Code and, separately for the State broadcaster, the BBC Charter and Agreement. This requirement is in stark contrast to that relating to the print media who are allowed, and in fact expected, to take a critical, partisan and provocative approach to matters of politics and public interest.

In the past, and as things stand at the moment, the mixture of approaches works to provide consumers with news sources originating from differing motivational standpoints. Equally, and crucially, the Committee noted that media audiences are still able quite easily to discern the difference in content production standards between the impartial and the partisan. However, it may be the case in future that the blurring of boundaries between news sources, caused by media convergence, may change the way news consumers approach sources of content. In this light, a change to the impartiality requirement may be appropriate for non-public service broadcasters. To this effect the report states at paragraph 114:

"In future, we think that non-PSB broadcast news and current affairs should be treated in the same way as non-broadcast news and current affairs as far as

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impartiality is concerned."

The report goes on to suggest the possibility of an alternative mechanism of voluntary compliance with the Broadcasting Code. This change would not be without controversy and would have a profound effect on the role and duties of non-public service broadcasting in the UK.

House of Lords Communications Committee Report on Media Convergence

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/ldcomuni/154/15402.htm

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