[GB] Ofcom publishes two reports concerning public service broadcasters

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Julian Wilkins
Wordley Partnership

Ofcom has published two reports concerning public service broadcasters (PSBs) in fulfilment of its obligation under the Digital Economy Act 2017 to review the prominence of PSBs. The first report, entitled "Review of Prominence for Public Sector Broadcasting", explains the regulator's recommendations to government to ensure that PSBs remain easy for TV viewers to find and watch on connected services and devices. The second report, "The Future of Public Service Media", gives Ofcom’s view as to the future of public service media.

In the first report, Ofcom proposes legislation to guarantee public service broadcasters a protected prominence on TV sets and to help the PSBs compete against online competitors such as Netflix, Amazon and YouTube. PSBs such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 must already be displayed prominently in the electronic channel guides of cable and satellite television services such as Sky and Virgin because of their public remit to provide news, weather and other services. Viewers should be able to find PSB content easily on the homepage of connected TVs, for example, set-top boxes and streaming sticks; other TV platforms may be subject to these prominence rules in due course as technology and viewing habits change, for instance ITV’s and the BBC’s recently introduced BritBox.

However, a declining interest in traditional television, particularly by younger audiences, has encouraged the PSBs to seek greater surety about maintaining their prominent position on Internet-connected TV sets which are free to display streaming applications such as Amazon Prime.

Ofcom indicated that some PSBs might have to improve their on-demand apps in order to qualify under new prominence rules to deliver an appropriate range of high-quality PSB content around particular genres, such as children’s content (an area in which Ofcom wishes PSB’s to invest more resources), current affairs and factual content, and programmes made specifically for UK viewers in order to fulfil their obligations under the Communications Act 2003.

Ofcom’s report says flexibility is required to adapt legislation as new technology emerges and viewing habits change. The regulator wishes to ensure that PSB channels remain easy to find on TV guides.

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As part of the report, Ofcom will review the future of PSBs in an online world and publish its conclusions by the end of the year. The regulator will engage with government and industry to discuss Ofcom's recommendations and next steps. Ofcom proposes that the government introduce new rules on prominence for modern viewing platforms in order to support traditional broadcasters.

The second published report, "The Future of Public Service Media", outlines Ofcom's plans to provide a forum on the future of public service media, appraise the PSBs' performance over the last five years and summarise the work Ofcom is undertaking to support PSBs. The report complements current activities such as the House of Lords Communications Committee enquiry into the future of public service broadcasting in the context of Video on Demand (VOD) and other pay-per-view content.

PSBs remain notable for producing a broad range of distinctive high-quality TV programmes that appeal to and reflect diverse communities and regions. Ofcom observed, "they help to cohere our society, providing shared experiences of drama, entertainment and learning." According to Ofcom's report, traditional TV and radio remain the most popular form of viewing and listening. However, there is a gradual shift towards well-funded, on-demand broadcasters with global reach such as that of Netflix as compared to PSBs who are increasingly subject to costs and revenue pressures, making content harder to finance. Furthermore, UK adults now watch on average more than half an hour of YouTube videos per day. Ofcom considers that PSBs need to meet these challenges, including encouraging younger audiences, and to be able to compete generally against the global digital programme providers; Ofcom wishes to ensure PSB is maintained and strengthened.

Ofcom's The Future of Public Service Media

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/155155/future-public-service-media.pdf

Ofcom's recommendations - Review of Prominence for Public Service Broadcasting

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/154461/recommendations-for-new-legislative-framework-for-psb-prominence.pdf

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