

A NEW FUTURE FOR COMMUNICATIONS

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is a charitable company, founded in 1896 (as the Ethical Union). It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists support freedom of belief and expression, so long as harm is not caused to others. BHA representatives are regularly called upon to participate in radio and television broadcasts.

Comments

The structure of the communications industry is changing rapidly, in response to developing technology and global needs. We welcome many of the proposals within the White Paper and the Government vision in adopting a strategic view for the 21st century. We do however have some specific comments related to diversity and religious broadcasting.

Maintaining diversity and plurality

We welcome the views set out in paragraph 4.2. However, it seems to us that the proposals for lighter touch economic regulation set out in 4.1 are in conflict with the aims of more diversity and plurality of 4.2.

We welcome the proposal to retain the strength of regional broadcasting and the recognition of different and diverse needs. Paragraph 4.4.7 mentions the role of the Cultural Diversity Network, which is monitored by DCMS (and eventually by OFCOM). Bodies such as this need to be more accountable to the UK as a whole: for example, how are its members appointed, what are their terms of reference? Given the limited information in the White Paper, it would appear to be a self-serving club of broadcasters and therefore its role and members need to be more widely known.

Digital technology, as the White Paper notes, gives the possibility of more local broadcasting from re-using freed spectrum and the possibility of small digital stations. There are exciting possibilities for community broadcasting.

The current radio RSLs provide niche rather than community services. We agree that more community radio can increase involvement in the community and believe that this is important in local responsibility and citizenship. The training possibilities which small local stations can provide are important springboards for career development, especially in areas away from the current regional broadcast centres.

The proposal to provide an 'Access' Fund to help start-ups for new services is innovative. The terms for access funding will need to be drafted very carefully. Such terms will need to be capable of:

- maintaining a balance between the types of initiative funded;
- ensuring that public money is not hi-jacked into self-serving projects, (rather than those that are for the benefit of the community overall);
- ensuring that potential links with industry-matched funding are carefully screened and managed;
- monitoring across regions and localities to ensure that a particular player does not have an undue influence by virtue of its participation in a large number of small projects over the whole of the UK.

The terms of reference for access to projects should include an element of claw-back for profitable ventures. There should also be some checks made on the quality and type of programming proposed, with sanctions if necessary. Particular care will be needed with respect to excluding groups with extreme views, such as racist groups. As humanists, we recognize that there is a difficult balance to be struck between freedom of expression and the protection of societal values, but in this situation would veer towards protection, given the possible harmful consequences of such broadcasting to a large number of people and to the ethos of society.

Since the people in the UK have such a wide variety of views, cultural backgrounds and are of world religions or none, there must be some balance in the way which community groups are given access to these funds. It could indeed be argued, that it is inappropriate for the state to fund access to broadcasting for religious groups at all, since this is likely to provide further fragmentation of the broadcast markets. It would be far better to concentrate funding on the local public service and community involvement in line with the Government's excellent aim of promoting better citizenship. In this way, BHA supports the view of the European Court of Human Rights in the case brought the United Christian Broadcasters, as reiterated by Janet Anderson MP in a recent DCMS briefing.

Media Ownership

We would suggest caution in adopting the changes requested by the radio industry itself. Economies of scale for example are not necessarily likely to be consistent with increasing diversity and plurality. The WP's analysis of cross-media rules in other countries omits some of the more far-reaching rules in countries such as the USA, for example on the requirement for citizenship for newspaper ownership and the limitation on foreign based holdings in US communications companies. We agree with the comment in paragraph 4.8.5 that cross-media consolidations on economic grounds could reduce the plurality of viewpoints and sources of information available. Recent changes with respect to the ownership of Daily Express reinforce our view. And whilst more people now

have access to information via electronic means, this is still a minority and many information sources on the Internet are not of a high standard. Consolidation will happen with the information providers on the Internet, as some companies become more successful than others: regulation of ownership across the various media will become more not less important.

Paragraph 4.9.1 proposes that religious bodies will be able to own local digital licences in line with the current rule on analogue licences. We believe that the Government should review and report on the current use of analogue licences held by religious bodies to see whether this extension is indeed justified. There is no evidence in the White Paper that this analysis has been effected.

Further access by religious bodies for ownership requires very careful consideration: not just in terms of potential demand, but also in terms of fit with other Government aspirations in terms of tolerance, citizenship and a generally inclusive society. We agree that concerns regarding the regulation of religious content are especially strong for terrestrial licences and scarce spectrum. It will be argued by some that the digital world will provide a far greater number of channels, and therefore the need to manage scarce spectrum is less important. We believe that some of the experiences of religious broadcasting in countries such as the USA would urge continued caution in the UK.

Opening up the digital field will also provide a problem in managing equitable access: how many licences are to be awarded for different faiths for example? Given the different sects and groups in the major world faiths it is possible that a large number of digital channels could be devoted to exclusively religious broadcasting. We believe that since such use would be the worst outcome for the majority of digital TV viewers, then the current rules on ownership should be retained. Strong demand from groups is not necessarily an indication for a demand from the population as whole: especially if viewing figures for current programmes (including those with a religious content) are taken into account.

Public Service Broadcasting

We agree that the current rules should be retained and especially with the views expressed in paragraph 5.3.10. Voluntary schemes for PSB schemes in the US have similar subscription levels to the UK licence fee, with fewer programmes and therefore less value for money. We applaud the strengths of PSB initiatives on BBC Radio 1, dealing with, for example, drugs and exam revision.

Safeguarding the interests of citizens

We agree with the proposal in paragraph 6.9 that current controls on religious advertising and programmes will be retained. We see no reason to extend any provision for religious programming which, judging by audience figures, is in any case a niche market. The diverse and pluralist UK society in the twenty-first

century includes people of faith and people of no faith at all. Whilst we are tolerant of those with genuine religious convictions, it is arguable that there should be no right given in any modern society to show only one set of views, by giving special access to broadcasting facilities to religious groups whilst excluding a rational humanist view. We would suggest that the current controls have operated too narrowly and that they should be reviewed with respect to diversity of provision.

**Approved by the trustees of the British Humanist Association
10 March 2001**