

The Newspaper Society's Response to Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review

The Newspaper Society (NS) represents the longest established regional media industry, which has a readership of over 40 million adults throughout the UK for its 1300 regional and local newspapers, to which must now be added its audience for its 1100 websites, 750 magazines, 36 radio stations and 2 TV stations.

The industry is committed to the provision of local news and information which reflects, informs, engages and empowers the communities which it has served for generations. Its journalists - and the quarter of its workforce focused on editorial matters - are the foundation of newsgathering in the UK nations, regions and localities.

The industry is ambitious to deliver such news, information and entertainment services in any way, place or time that its audience wants.

Regulatory reform would greatly assist the industry's ability to innovate for the future, whilst sustaining its communities' trust in their content. Regional newspaper companies do need further relaxation of the controls over newspaper mergers and over cross-media ownership, especially those which govern the 'traditional media' at regional level - which can mean the most local of areas and markets. Significant improvement could be achieved if the competition authorities adapted their interpretation of the current legislation and market definition in line with reality.

As Ofcom will be well aware from its work on the BBC Local Market Impact Assessment, investment in online services is considered crucial to the future of the industry, whilst building upon its traditional strengths of local presence and local content.

Ofcom's second review of public service broadcasting and content and its recommendations to government are important to the industry. The regional commercial media will obviously be affected by adoption of any of the proposed models in the nations, regions and localities. Funding options could have particular impact upon the industry. No policy should be recommended which could unfairly handicap our members' ability to compete. We would also like to explore whether there are opportunities as well as threats for the industry.

These proposals are of great importance at the current time, given the challenges already faced by our industry. These range from the difficult economic climate to the encouragement being given to the public sector and local government, not only to withdraw advertising from the local press, but also to invest public funds in its own competing media.

Ofcom's proposals could easily translate into unfair competition: further funding and support of the industry's existing, publicly subsidised competitors, or encouragement and support for the entry of new competitors, but jeopardizing our industry's ability to continue to produce the range and depth of local coverage valued by its communities.

However, we recognise that Ofcom's thinking is, of course, developing. We noted the most recent specific reference to the regional and local press, in Stewart Purvis's recent speech, suggesting options such as local newspapers' bids for funding to produce regional TV news content. But other issues, such as the stabilization plan for ITV and options for third parties to produce news content, or the growth of local TV stations covering a region, cities or local area as a result of spectrum freed by the digital switchover, are also highly relevant to regional media companies.

Such proposals raise issues of policy, principle and practice of immense importance to the future of the industry. It is important that these are understood and taken into consideration by Ofcom.

The NS would welcome the opportunity to discuss Ofcom's proposals and all developments in its thinking since the publication of the second public service broadcasting review, together with other relevant matters within its remit which impact upon the regional media industry.

We would be happy to help arrange a meeting.

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