

RTÉ response to Ofcom's Consultation on the Future of Digital Terrestrial Television.

RTÉ, Ireland's primary Public Service Broadcaster, has an interest in the Ofcom consultation on The Future of Digital Terrestrial Television (published 21 November 2007) as developments throughout the UK have, and will continue to have, profound implications for the development of Digital Terrestrial Television across the island of Ireland. Given the relevance of developments in DTT in Northern Ireland RTÉ wishes to address specifically questions 11 to 15 in this brief Response statement.

The need for co-ordination across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has long been established, with regard to spectrum frequency planning, digital switchover and the remit of public service broadcasting throughout the island of Ireland. Eamon Ryan T.D., the Irish Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, has repeatedly stated that 'in order to ensure continuity of existing services and to ensure an all-island digital TV experience, greater North/South co-operation and a move to DTT ahead of the EU deadline is urged.' [see, for example <http://blog.siliconrepublic.com/2007/uk-analogue-tv-switch-off-on-the-way/>]

In addition, the concept of reciprocity between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, in terms of what the New Ireland Forum (1984) called 'the reciprocal acceptance of identity and interests' has long been an aspiration.

2 May 1984 Report of the New Ireland Forum:

8.7 Under joint authority the two traditions in Northern Ireland would find themselves on a basis of equality and both would be able to find an expression of their identity in the new institutions. There would be no diminution of the Britishness of the unionist population. Their identity, ethos and link with Britain would be assured by the authority and presence of the British Government in the Joint authority arrangements. At the same time it would resolve one basic defect of (a) the failed 1920-25 attempt to settle the Irish Question and (b) the present arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland - the failure to give satisfactory political, symbolic and administrative expression to Northern nationalists. Structures would thus be provided with which the nationalists in the North could identify, which might reverse their progressive alienation from existing structures. Security arrangements in which for the first time both nationalists and unionists could have confidence could be developed, thus providing a basis for peace and order. The climate would thus be created for the emergence of normal political life, of compromise and of mutual confidence based on security in the reciprocal acceptance of identity and interests.

Regarding the Irish language the Forum stated:

6.7 All the cultural traditions in Ireland, North and South, would be guaranteed full expression and encouragement. The educational system would reflect the two main traditions on the island. The Irish language and culture would continue to be fostered by the state, and would be made more accessible to everyone in Ireland without any compulsion or imposition on any section.

These aspirations have been re-iterated in subsequent agreements between the British and Irish Governments, most recently in the Belfast and Edinburgh Agreements.

With regard to broadcasting, reciprocity may be achieved by the free-to-air exchange of terrestrial broadcasting services across the border to/from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

RTÉ wishes to comment as follows:

1. The OFCOM consultation on The Future of Digital Terrestrial Television, 21 November 2007, specifically describes 'national services' under section 6.24 and following.

In this regard the importance of TG4 in providing Irish language broadcasting services for Northern Ireland is acknowledged. RTÉ fully supports the inclusion of TG4 on Mux 2, and believes that the commitment by the British Government to continue to support TG4 in Northern Ireland is fundamental to the unfolding reciprocal arrangements between the 'two traditions' in that jurisdiction. In addition, this will also be important in the re-configuring of DTT (Freeview) dissemination throughout the UK and the regions.

2. Central to the recent political progress in Northern Ireland has been the mutual recognition of the validity of the unionist and nationalist traditions. As An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern T.D. said to the Joint Houses of Parliament, Westminster on 15th of May 2007:

The Good Friday Agreement has delivered peace and promise to Ireland by accommodating the rights, the interests and the legitimate aspirations of all. It represents the triumph of common interests over inherited divisions. It is not an end of history. But it is a new beginning. It is an unchallengeable consensus on how any future change in the status of Northern Ireland will be effected: only with consent freely given, and with full respect for the rights of all traditions and identities on the island.

One of the most creative moments in human history was the meeting between the English language and the Irish people...They all found their genius in the English language, but they drew on a perspective that was uniquely Irish. Today, a vibrant cultural life is shared by both our countries across every imaginable field - in music, dance, education, theatre, film and sport. In culture, as in sport, we share and together enjoy so much. And in all these areas, too, our endeavours are not divorced from our history, but are built on it.

Free-to-air terrestrial broadcasting in Northern Ireland, even since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, has remained largely that of the British Public Service Broadcasting channels. The viewer choices offered free-to-air, while localised, have never included RTÉ, Ireland's National Public Service Broadcaster and the major provider of television programming of choice in both Irish and English languages in the Republic of Ireland. RTÉ certainly welcomes the commitment by the British Government to continue to support the Irish language through TG4 on DTT. However given TG4's particular Irish language remit, we believe that this does not fully reflect broadcasting or indeed the culture of the whole island. Language is one part of a complex of identities.

While there has been a spill over of analogue services on both sides of the border for many years, the advent of the DTT platform in Britain and Northern Ireland and soon in the Republic of Ireland provides a unique opportunity for broadcasters to contribute to the bedding down of peace and reconciliation and play a part in supporting the normalisation of Northern Irish and indeed Irish society by allowing for the full expression of 'all traditions and identities on the island' free-to-air in both jurisdictions.

Based on this view RTÉ believes that there would be significant public value in creating the framework whereby reciprocity of free-to-air terrestrial broadcasting services could be achieved on both sides of the border. The initiation of DTT in the Republic of Ireland now offers this as a real possibility, notwithstanding the political, legal and regulatory issues to be addressed in order to enable this to come into being.

There are issues of frequency planning to be addressed, as well as the discussion regarding optimal technical standards to be adopted in both jurisdictions. In addition, the regulatory

regime would also have to work very closely with the manufacturers in order to ensure a smooth deployment of suitable equipment throughout the island of Ireland.

RTÉ would welcome the opportunity to engage with Ofcom and the other relevant UK authorities in order to explore the potential of such a reciprocal agreement.