

Consumer Panel: advice to Ofcom



Title of Ofcom Project:	The Future of Radio
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1. This is the formal response of the Ofcom Consumer Panel to Ofcom's consultation on The Future of Radio.

Commercial radio content regulation

2. *Aligning the regulation of analogue licences with the lighter regulation applied to DAB digital radio: we recognise that this is realistic and we do not believe that the consumer interest will be harmed (Ofcom proposals 1.1 and 1.2).*
3. However, we would encourage Ofcom not to tie this alignment to an arbitrary figure for the threshold of those listening through digital platforms. Rather, for the purposes of planning, we believe that Ofcom should take the practical approach of setting a date for the shift to lighter regulation of analogue radio, towards which the industry and Ofcom itself can move.
4. "*Localness*": the Consumer Panel agrees that Ofcom should have the statutory duty to ensure the provision of local material across all local commercial stations on a platform-neutral basis, and not just across analogue stations, as at present. We believe that this makes sense given the ever-increasing proportion of radio listening through digital platforms. (*Ofcom proposal 1.4*)

Commercial radio ownership regulation

5. We support moves towards a single set of ownership rules which would be more straightforward, while preserving the important requirements for plurality of ownership (*Ofcom proposal 2*).
6. As outlined in paragraph 3 of this submission, we believe that this should happen at a future date set by Ofcom, rather than an arbitrary date linked to the threshold of listening through digital platforms.

New ways of licensing radio broadcasting

7. We support the proposition that Ofcom should have the ability to license radio broadcasting in a technology-neutral way, as this would allow consumers to benefit from access to radio through a wider variety of technologies (*Ofcom proposal 4*).

Community radio

8. We believe that community radio has been successful in providing social benefits, and we support proposals to simplify the regulation applied to it, making it less stringent and more flexible (*Ofcom proposal 6*).
9. We think that community radio stations can play a role in tackling illegal broadcasting, by providing more opportunities for those who want to broadcast legally but are prevented due to scarcity of spectrum resources.
10. We note that finance for the support of community radio is provided by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the Welsh Assembly Government, and we propose that Ofcom should, in conjunction with the UK government, consider whether such provision should be made more widely available in the UK.

Other considerations

11. Looking beyond the six specific proposals outlined in the Future of Radio consultation document, we hope that Ofcom will take into consideration the concerns of disabilities groups, such as those representing blind people and people with hearing impairments.
12. Whilst we understand that Ofcom does not have the ability to mandate equipment specifications, Section 10 of the Communications Act does give Ofcom the duty to encourage availability of easily usable apparatus and services and we propose that Ofcom should give urgent consideration to how it carries out this duty in relation to the use of radio equipment by blind or sight-impaired people, for whom it is such an important medium.
13. Where they are used for radio, Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs) need to be accessible to the blind, maybe through voice output which announces the name of each radio station it finds, and with larger display screens to help those with limited sight. Larger display screens could also help deliver subtitles for those with hearing impairments.
14. The Consumer Panel is concerned that DAB digital radio is only available to 90% of the population, with significant parts of rural Scotland and Wales, for example, still without access to DAB. The Consumer Panel believes that DAB should be universally available, as far as

practically possible, and urges Ofcom to consider what steps need to be taken to make this a reality.

Stakeholder engagement

15. On 31 May 2007, Ofcom convened a workshop to discuss the consultation document on The Future of Radio with consumer stakeholders. Unfortunately, other than ourselves, there were only two organisations represented.
16. We would urge Ofcom to consider whether its stakeholder engagement on this document has been as full as it could be; and whether, in the light of this, it should be considering different ways of engaging with consumers and citizens. We would be keen to work with Ofcom on thinking through this proposition.

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