

Review of BBC Digital Services

Submitted by Scottish Radio Holdings plc

In the sphere of analogue radio frequencies, the BBC holds the larger proportion of those available simply because BBC radio predated commercial radio in the UK by so many years. The advent of digital continued to give the BBC rights denied to the commercial radio sector. Because the BBC has been able, until recently, to develop services without reference to any other body or with regard to the sector as a whole, we have a radio situation in the UK heavily skewed in favour of the publicly funded broadcaster. In addition, the BBC has been allowed to enter the commercial arena using its enormous promotional clout across radio, television and publications.

The distribution of new digital multiplexes gave the BBC a national platform for all its national services and several new ones. Its additional participation in DTT via Freeview continues its national radio domination, and the fact that all its local and regional services have carriage rights on the commercial sector's local multiplexes compounds the BBC's favoured position. It is interesting to note that, while the BBC has a right of automatic access to local commercially operated multiplexes, no such right exists for the local commercial radio stations themselves.

The BBC's dominance in digital radio has not been entirely negative in that it has encouraged the corporation to make use of its massive marketing power in promoting digital listening and DAB set sales, something it may have been less inclined to do were it not for its particularly strong position. At the same time, while it would be fair to say that the BBC has made a major commitment to DAB, that commitment does not rest entirely on terrestrial digital multiplexes given its involvement with DTT, satellite and internet developments. It may be regarded as a growing concern for others that in the UK digital radio listening is likely to take place across a number of platforms, with the BBC well represented across all of them, but the commercial sector more limited and mainly concentrated on terrestrial DAB multiplexes, particularly insofar as local services are concerned.

Another area where the BBC's extensive involvement has had beneficial effects is the more pragmatic and listener led approach taken to data-rates and 'quality' to allow the introduction of new services. It is important that the BBC is further encouraged down this path with the specific objective of allowing the commercial sector to share some of any future capacity it may have across its various digital platforms.

With new frequencies soon to become available given the possibility of a further three national digital multiplexes, we would urge the Government to ensure that at least two of these are offered to the commercial sector. We would further urge that a preset percentage of the available capacity in all cases be allocated to national services originating from outside the Greater London area. It is a national disgrace in the UK that all UK wide analogue radio and TV services are controlled out of London, thus limiting the prism through which the nation views itself by restricting, or indeed excluding, artists, writers and commentators living and working at a distance from London. Having missed rectifying this completely distorted distribution of our national media in analogue, it would be unforgivable if the Government failed now to take the opportunity offered by DAB.

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