



01/13365

20 August 2001

Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
Secretary of State
Department of Culture Media & Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London
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Dear Secretary of State

Plans for new BBC digital radio Asian Network services

I understand that you are due to make an announcement later this week about the BBC's proposals for a digital radio network aimed at Asian listeners. I am therefore writing to you today, ahead of that announcement, to express my very grave concerns about the freedom with which the BBC is apparently allowed to create new services that compete directly with those produced by existing commercially-funded broadcasters, and to urgently bring these concerns to your attention.

Asian Sound Radio began broadcasting as a local service for the Asian communities of Manchester and the North West in 1995. With the support of the community, both in terms of listeners and advertising revenue, we have managed to develop the business, so that today we also broadcast on DAB digital radio throughout the Greater Manchester region; have worked successfully as a partner in the DRg consortium in London, winning the third independent London digital radio multiplex, with plans to begin broadcasting in the capital later this year; and have also been included as a prospective programme provider in an unopposed application for a multiplex licence to serve Bradford and Huddersfield. Yet we are not a cash-rich business. Our analogue operation in Manchester trades at only just above break-even, and much of the company's development has been financed by my family's own funds. Indeed, Asian Sound Radio is essentially a small family business.

The prospect of a BBC digital radio network aimed at exactly the same audiences that we seek to serve puts the very existence of that business at risk.

In common with the majority of the commercial radio sector, Asian Sound Radio welcomes the BBC's proposal to invest more in digital radio services. But we look to BBC Radio to provide services that are genuinely distinct from those provided by the advertising-funded sector. Indeed, I note that your own department said exactly this in June of this year in their document "BBC Public Services: Approvals", where it states that the value to the public of a BBC service can be measured by *'the distinctiveness (in programming or content) of the proposed BBC service from those provided by other broadcasters'*. The document also states that you will judge a new BBC service against *'the nature and coverage of commercial services of a similar nature'*. It surely follows, therefore, that any BBC digital radio Asian network should be distinct from our own service here at Asian Sound Radio and from those

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services provided by Sabras Radio, Sunrise Radio and Radio XL. From what I have seen of the rather vague proposals from the BBC, I am not convinced that this will be the case.

It is, in fact, rather difficult to understand why operators such as ourselves, who are required to submit detailed programming proposals in order to win new licences and then to keep to the 'format' proposed for the licence duration, are expected to sit quietly by while the BBC is given the green light to create new services with the vaguest of programming descriptions and with no requirement to keep even to those vague outlines once the services are up and running! If the expansion of the Asian Network is to be approved by Government, then surely its content will need to be far more closely defined before such approval can be given. As the BBC proposals stand, it seems to me that they will severely damage commercial radio's analogue and digital services and will not increase diversity of choice for Asian listeners.

You will also be aware of the concerns of independent Asian broadcasters about the increasingly close ties forged between the BBC Asian Network and local Asian business interests. I do fear that, should the Asian Network be allowed to spread unchecked, then not only will the existing independent broadcasters face unnecessary competition for the listeners that they already serve, but that they will also face inappropriate BBC competition for the financial support of local businesses.

In short, the BBC's plans for a digital Asian Network seem to me to be designed both to stifle opportunity for future private initiative by companies such as ours and to undermine our current activity, which is at an early and fragile stage. The announcement that you will make later this week should therefore indicate clearly whether any limitation should be applied to the publicly funded broadcaster's persistent duplication of services already provided by the independent sector. I believe strongly that the Government must now define the acceptable degree of impact that a BBC service may have on other services in the market.

At present, the BBC Asian Network recruits presenters from its commercial rivals, mimics commercial radio programme schedules and forges close relationships with Asian businesses that endanger commercial Asian services' income from advertising as well local and national concerts and promotional events. If you give the BBC the go-ahead to continue in this vein via a national digital Asian Network, it will be a clear signal to the country's independent Asian broadcasters that the government really does believe that all that the BBC does is 'good' and all that is done in private broadcasting is 'bad'.

I urge you to consider these views carefully before making your announcement.

Yours sincerely



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c.c. Vanessa Brand, Head of Public Service Broadcasting Branch
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