

## Consultation on Media Ownership Rules

### Comments from the British Humanist Association (BHA)

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is a charitable company, founded in 1896 (as the Ethical Union). It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists support freedom of belief and expression, so long as harm is not caused to others. BHA representatives are regularly called upon to participate in radio and television broadcasts. We submitted comments on the White Paper which preceded this consultation, *A New Future for Communications*.

We welcome many of the ideas that informed the approach adopted in the consultation paper; especially those associated with diversity and plurality. We understand the difficulties faced in making decisions on technologies which are changing quickly and which can affect people's lives in so many different ways, from information, participation in the democratic process to entertainment.

Our detailed comments on this consultation relate specifically to section 6.1.6.

It is apparent from the comments received on the previous consultation that there has been a wide attempt at lobbying by some sections of the Christian community in favour of a more relaxed regime on religious ownership, but that different views are held in other parts of the Christian community. Whilst we are in no way advocating an extension to religious broadcasting or ownership of religious stations, we believe that the Government should be concerned that other major faith groups appear not to have made any public comments. This suggests to us that those faith groups and communities either have no interest in religious broadcasting or that they are not yet sufficiently engaged in the democratic process.

In our previous submission, we commented on the proposal to address the anomaly between the ownership of local analogue and local digital terrestrial stations. In our submission we said:

*We believe that the Government should review and report on the current use of analogue licences held by religious bodies to see whether this extension is indeed justified.*

The Government has yet to produce evidence to support their proposal. Those wanting this anomaly removed will of course welcome it, but we believe that those making policy decisions should demonstrate to the community as a whole why such a change is justified. If the Government does proceed with this proposal, we agree with the Church of England view that some controls will still be necessary.

In our previous submission we outlined why we disagreed with the proposal to remove restrictions on religious organisations holding broadcasting licences. We note that other organisations in the faith communities share our concerns. For example, there is a strong note of caution in the submission from the Church of England: -

*There is a strong case for saying that religious bodies owning and operating stations would be operating in the media environment in a very different way to commercial organisations. .... It is also unclear how the status of a religious group might be regarded when its primary activity is broadcasting and when broadcasting produces the main source of revenue.*

We believe that a disregard for the differences in the way bodies operate and behave has produced the problems that have been observed in the US. We note that the Church of Ireland had a similar view in its submission, as did the Society of Friends which said that: -

*We believe that respect for the values of others is a core aspect of religious liberty. While acknowledging the fine balance required between freedom of speech and protection of the right of the vulnerable from manipulation, we consider that this [right] would not be served best by the granting of territorial (sic) digital licences to religious organisations.*

There is a further danger in allocating channels to niche interests of a faith nature. Broadcast audiences in the UK are already much more fragmented than they were when there were only 4 terrestrial TV channels. Niche channels (relating to one, or a part of one faith group) are unlikely to deal with the multi-cultural aspects of UK society today. If an aim of broadcasting policy is to reflect the aims and interests of society as a whole, then the fragmentation that may result if religious ownership restrictions are removed must be a major concern for government. We agree with the Commission for Racial Equality which said in its submission that:

*We do not support the provision of these services in a way which excludes others.*

We believe that religious ownership of stations has the primary effect of excluding others. Such ownership is unlikely to promote religious tolerance for those of different faiths, or indeed for those like members of the BHA who have no faith. Indeed, the Church of Ireland pointed out in its submission that the celebration of one faith's traditions might prove uncomfortable for members of another faith.

The consultation also seeks views on multiplex licences, whether local or national. It will be apparent that, in opposing ownership of individual channels by religious organisations, we would also be opposed to the ownership of multiplex

licences. Whilst the arguments are similar, there are even more dangers in the amount of control over the programmes and channels which would be possible in a multiplex environment. It is possible that only programmes supporting the controlling organisation's view of society and the world would be permitted. This could have the effect of denying access to other information and opinions, especially where not all members of a household share the same values or beliefs.

The BHA remains opposed to the ownership of broadcasting channels or multiplexes by religious organisations. We believe that the Government has not demonstrated the outcomes of the present regime to convince us that a change in policy is needed. On the contrary, given the strong need for tolerance for other people's views and a better understanding of different traditions within a multi-cultural society (including those of no faith) we submit that a further extension of ownership would be detrimental to other aims of the Government. Even a strong regulatory environment is unlikely to be able to address adequately some of the difficulties that we and others foresee.

British Humanist Association  
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