

Consultation on Media Ownership Rules

A response from mediawatch-uk

(formerly The National Viewers' and Listeners' Association)

The primary concern for Government is to ensure that the ownership rules favour, above all, the public interest. Whilst we acknowledge that there are considerable commercial interests, the media, in the final analysis, should be a service to the public. Accordingly, the Government must ensure that ownership rules allow for a range of opinion to be expressed freely within the limits, determined by Parliament, appropriate in a democratic society.

Having, enabled a degree of "cross media ownership" in the past the necessary safeguards to prevent suppression of legitimate opinion or criticism must be set out either in the primary legislation or within the remit of the regulatory authority. There must also be provision for an appeals system readily accessible to the public.

We agree with the proposition, 6.4.13, that OFCOM should have powers of "assessing whether...the accurate presentation of news and free expression" is compromised by certain ownership transfers. It is clearly not in the public interest to allow control of newspapers, television and radio to be monopolised either nationally or locally. We agree with the proposition 6.4.15 that elected Ministers, answerable to Parliament, should on the advice of regulators, exercise a moderating influence to ensure that the public interest is safeguarded at all times.

We believe that media ownership rules should be reviewed from time to time in the light of experience and changing circumstances. But in any review the overriding concern should be the public interest and whether this is being properly and adequately served. We can see no good reason why OFCOM should not take on this role.

We welcome the undertaking to remove the anomaly by which religious bodies are disallowed from owning a local terrestrial digital licence. Even though digital satellite broadcasters enable nation-wide access to local radio services we can see no good reason why a religious organisation cannot hold a "national digital

sound programme service licence" given that such licences are granted to secular organisations. We recognise, however, that safeguards on programme content are desirable and necessary. However, the present rules and guidelines that apply to radio stations owned by religious organisations have shown themselves to be open to abuse and should be reviewed.

Ends

mediawatch-uk,

3 Willow House, Kennington Road, Ashford, Kent, TN24 0NR

Tel: 01233-633936 e-mail: info@mediawatchuk.org

Director: John C Beyer

24 January 2002