

*"Working for quality
and diversity in
British broadcasting"*

Founded by Jocelyn Hay in 1983



PO Box 401, Gravesend, Kent DA12 9FY
Telephone: 01474 352835 Fax: 01474 351112

E-mail: info@vlv.org.uk
Web: www.vlv.org.uk

‘Digital Britain’ – The Interim Report

Response from Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British broadcasting system.

VLV’s main focus for last 25 years has been on broadcasting but we have always taken an interest in the developments and convergence across the media industries. We have had representatives on the relevant committees dealing with the consumer interests in both digital television and radio. We ensure that our members are kept informed about developments through formal sessions at conferences and hands-on demonstrations. Through seminars we have facilitated discussions on digital issues among key players in the industry.

On 1st April 2009, in association with Ofcom and BT, we are organising a public conference in London looking at the wider issues of media literacy in the digital environment entitled '**Making the most of New Media**'. The conference is already over-subscribed, and we plan to repeat it in other parts of the UK.

Our aim is to see that ways are found to continue into the digital age the essence of the public service broadcasting system that has served us so well for half a century.

We welcome the main thrust of ‘Digital Britain’ – The Interim Report, and agree with it that ‘The digital society offers us, as citizens, increased access to information, participation and influence, not least in the democratic process...’

VLV shares ‘Digital Britain’s’ belief that: ‘It is important for the UK that we enjoy content over digital networks that relates to our culture and experiences as a society and informs us as citizens in a democracy. In practice, this means content generated in the UK for UK consumers, and plural sources of informed, accurate and impartial news, as well as of informed comment and analysis.’

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Honorary Officers: Richard Lindley Chairman Hugh Peltor CBE Treasurer
Company Secretary: Messrs. Waterlow Registrars Ltd.

VLV trusts that this important concept is at the heart of ‘Digital Britain’s’ Final Report. We make the following further points:

Will the needs and concerns of the citizen and consumer be heard?

We regard it as vitally important that the views of citizens and consumers should be fully represented in the final ‘Digital Britain’ Report. We note that the project has a Steering Board of eleven members with a wide range of representation from industry. However we are concerned that not one of its members is from citizen/consumer organisations, even though one of the themes of the Report is the inclusion of all citizens into our digital future. We read “*that many stakeholders have given generously of their time to produce these emerging findings and proposals*” and hope this included citizen and consumer representatives. However we consider that there is no substitute for citizen/consumer representation at the heart of the ‘Digital Britain’ process.

A lack of this representation seems already to have led to a culture of assuming what citizens need from the digital revolution rather than researching their actual needs. For example: Do the elderly, vulnerable or isolated want access to services from a specially enabled set top box? This may be a useful add on but these at-risk groups may prefer human rather than digital interaction.

Recent research for the Consumer Communications Panel confirms that citizens and consumers want future developments to be focused on their needs and wants, not the technological possibilities. They also believe that converged communications are now so central to our lives that that no-one should miss out; they ask that the potential advantages should be available to all.

There are many statistics gathered in the appendices of ‘Digital Britain’. These provide a good deal of raw data, some about the opinions and preferences of citizens and consumers. However, much of this data does not seem to have had an impact on the main thrust of the Report. For example, the ownership of PCs among the over 65s indicates that there may be a generation in the UK beyond the reach of the advantages offered by a 2Mb/s broadband connection.

The digital revolution in Britain has an international context and we welcome the wide range of experience on the ‘Digital Britain’ Steering Board. However, to ensure that they can take advantage of the move to a digital Britain the regions and nations of the United Kingdom must have their special needs met. The Report has noted the challenges for the UK but the Steering Board appears to have a significant bias towards London and the South East. The ‘Digital Britain’ events to be held in the nations in April and May will not compensate for this. We think the Steering Board would benefit from permanent input from some non-metropolitan membership.

VLV supports the submission from the Consumer Expert Group on the Interim Report, in particular its comments on television and radio.

Digital Content – Poetry and Pipes

‘Digital Britain’ – The Interim Report is primarily about the creation of a digital infrastructure as the necessary basis for successful manufacturing and service industries, and a prosperous Britain. While we fully recognise the importance of that objective we regard the content that the new network carries as equally important to achieving that end. Lord Carter has recently suggested that for the moment, content must take a back seat while the Government concentrates on developing the digital network - that ‘the pipes’ are currently more important than ‘the poetry’. VLV does not share that view. Our citizens at home and our competitors abroad value and admire, listen to, view, and buy, what our broadcasting system at its best achieves. VLV believes that content – what goes through the pipes – must remain a priority for the broadcasting minister, and for BERR as much as for the DCMS. British broadcasting is not just a cultural but also an economic asset to the UK.

We are glad to see that ‘Digital Britain’ – The Interim Report does address some of the broadcasting issues that concern us greatly – plurality in particular. We believe that the Government should do more than ‘aim for’ public service plural provision, as the Report suggests. In VLV’s view it must find a way to maintain what has been a central feature of British television broadcasting for more than half a century – though we fully recognise the difficulty.

We note that neither ‘Digital Britain’ – The Interim Report, nor Ofcom’s Second Public Service Broadcasting Review ‘Putting Viewers First’, has seriously explored the option of industry levies as an alternative means of funding the Channel. We think this should be done. It cannot be right that internet companies are building their success on content so much of which has been created by others without making a bigger contribution themselves.

As far as our broadcasting system stands today we reluctantly accept that to all intents and purposes ITV is no longer a major PSB channel. However, we regard it as absolutely vital that the BBC does not once again become the sole major provider of PSB programming. As a result, we accept the need for finding alternative sources of funding to enable Channel 4 both to maintain its current levels of PSB and – in the

light of ITV's retreat from PSB – expand them, in order to compete with the BBC in scale and quality across all programme genres.

Of the serious options so far discussed – privatisation of Channel 4 (in substance if not in name) by a merger with Five, or some form of partnership with BBC Worldwide, we regard the second option as the least worst, since it would bring together two publicly owned bodies not directly funded by the licence fee. The new entity that resulted from such a partnership would require a new remit to ensure that it did not become simply a BBC mark 2, and retained the essence of its original 'alternative' mission.

As for the alternative solution, VLV finds it hard to see how a publicly owned Channel 4 could share a boardroom with a commercially driven (and foreign owned) Five.

Children's Television

While the shape of a new broadcasting system which would successfully continue to provide Public Service Broadcasting remains unsettled VLV welcomes 'Digital Britain's' recognition of the importance of original Children's Television programmes, made by UK companies and broadcast by channels other than the BBC. Recently Lord Carter told Save Kids TV: "I do agree that this is an area where plurality matters and should be preserved. That is why we have identified children's content as one of our priorities that will be addressed by the new framework for public service content we want to design." VLV wrote to Lord Carter (9 February 09) welcoming that statement. We strongly believe that there is a pressing need for original UK Children's production for *all* ages, but especially for school-age children, broadcast on channels other than the BBC's.

Rights Issues

‘Digital Britain’ – The Interim Report recognises the importance of rights issues in regulating usage and protecting income, and proposes a Rights Agency to develop a way forward. Rights holders and distributors could jointly fund enforcement. VLV believes it is vital that this issue is resolved, and that unlawful file-sharing is minimised.

Content Heritage

The Interim Report states that the current terms of trade between Independents and broadcasters have worked well, but that perhaps overlooks the issue of long-term access to content, given the issues of economic and technical viability. If independent producers retain their rights there may be little incentive for the broadcasters or distributors to archive their content. There is no guarantee that Independents will be able to make their holdings available for future decades, due to unpredictable company life spans and lack of strategic investment. This could be a major threat to the UK’s media heritage.

A study is required into the extent of local holdings by independent producers and their plans for the future. It may be necessary to develop a compulsory deposit process for UK audio-visual content, such as there is for printed content through the British Library. A deposit scheme was attempted some years ago: it failed, but the reasons for that should be investigated and a revised system proposed.

Summary

VLV supports the idea of ‘Digital Britain’ and the energy with which it is being planned by BERR. We have set out some of the issues on which we feel strongly. Our overriding conviction is that if this great project is to succeed then the voice of the listener and viewer, the citizen and consumer, must not merely be heard but must have a real influence on its development.

Richard Lindley
Chairman
Voice of the Listener & Viewer