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Digital Bill's dim prospects

The Digital Economy Bill struggling through Parliament will be a disappointment even if it gets through before the election, says **GARY HERMAN**, and that's far from certain

The bill is the flagship of the UK government's "Digital Britain" process and it might have been expected to set out a comprehensive vision for the economy of the future.

Instead, its mish-mash of measures is less about building a digital economy than regulating the digital bits of the old one.

Some of these bits are admittedly important. Illegal file-sharing, for instance, continues to be an issue for companies investing in intellectual property and individual creators.

But even where it is apparent that the existing legal framework cannot cope with the changing world, the bill simply adds layers of regulation and heaps administrative power onto the stash that Peter Mandelson, boss of the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), is busily accumulating.

Now that the bill has cleared its passage through the Lords and has been passed to the Commons, it has become clear that poor drafting is likely to delay it so severely that it could even fall.

On copyright, which particularly exercised their lordships, the treatment of orphan works whose owner cannot be traced will need further consultation, while the idea of

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DG gets his capitulation in first

BBC: TIME TO FIGHT

BBC director general Mark Thompson has thrown out a challenge to which the CPBF and all supporters of public service media will respond, to save the corporation.

With a UK general election only weeks away he announced cuts in programming and was accused of getting his capitulation in first – caving in to likely pressure from the Conservatives if they were to win power.

Two national digital radio stations – 6 Music and the Asian Network – will close in 2011, along with a number of websites, cutting jobs and spending on the websites by 25 per cent. The BBC Worldwide marketing arm will sell off its profitable stable of magazines.

Mark Thompson also made specific pledges to commercial media not to tread on their patches in future, notably

that there will be no increase in resources for local newsgathering. Regional press groups have been lobbying hard against supposedly unfair competition from the BBC.

Active protests groups have sprung up to stop the radio closures and the BBC unions are organising opposition.

Mark Thompson is noted for the ineptitude of his timing in politically-related matters. But by announcing closures before the post-election heat is really on he has created a focus for supporters of public service broadcasting to campaign around.

Consultation on the closures goes on until May 25 and there is every chance that they can be reversed. It is up to us and everyone who wants to protect public service, high quality media from rampaging corporate publishers to make the campaign irresistible.

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Local media

'Tax rich firms to help poor public media'

The call for a levy on big media companies that profit from the digital reuse of original journalism but pay nothing for it became an election issue in March.

Campaigning organisations and media unions have been arguing that news aggregators such as Google, mobile phone and pay-TV firms such as Virgin, ISPs, and non-public service broadcasters such as BSkyB, should pay to keep public service content going through the current crisis.

Last year a report from the Blairite think-tank the IPPR, commissioned by the NUJ and BECTU, put forward various ideas for levying such

companies to fund public service news operations in local and regional areas. The IPPR said a 1 per cent levy on BSkyB and Virgin Media could bring in around £70 million a year and one on the mobile operators £208 million a year.

The proposal was followed up by an academic study at Goldsmiths College, London University, for the Carnegie Trust, which in March put out a report on the "Good Society"; that brought the idea into national debate.

The Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in UK and Ireland is a major piece of research looking at ways to strengthen and improve the "civic society".

It notes the decline in local news media, as newspaper companies slash staff and spending to maintain their profits, and says it is "clear that some government funding is necessary to protect the public service value of the media ...

"Levies on the use of aggregated material have the potential to generate significant revenue to support the production of new public

service and local content ... Original news reporting needs to be supported so that it is financially viable; this could require charging those who are not authorised to use and distribute this material."

The government has proposed to fund its regional Independently Financed News Consortia by "top-slicing" a surplus in the BBC's digital switchover funding, and the Conservatives say they will oppose any public finance, preferring to scrap media ownership regulations and take other steps to boost the profitability of existing publishers.

The new report, from a mainstream "Blairite" source, is a step forward for the CPBF-backed campaign for public action to defend the public interest in maintaining local news.

The Carnegie report also supports the continuation of the BBC licence fee to "protect its respected, world-class, independent and original journalism". Further resources for public service media should be found through the industry levies rather than "top-slicing" the licence fee.

CARRY ON NEWSGATHERING

Journalists, trade unionists and academics got together at a meeting in Westminster in March to begin a campaign for public action to save the local media.

The meeting – Democracy without Journalists: the Crisis in Local News – centred on the recent study by a Goldsmiths College team,

New Media, Old News, which detailed the decline in newsgathering and the role of online news and sources; and on the NUJ's Economic Stimulus Plan for local media.

James Curran, director of Goldsmiths' media research centre, said that following the spread of freesheet newspapers and the deregulation of

TV, a "tsunami is sweeping through local journalism as a result of the rise of the internet as an advertising medium. The net is cheap, and reaches a large number of people.

"Between 2000 and 2008, the net's share of classified advertising expenditure soared from 2 to 45 percent, while that of the local press slumped from 47 to 26 per cent."

James Curran said 106 local papers had folded in 2008-09 and more would follow.

"The decline of local journalism, decline of local democracy, and growing disaffection with politics, are all taking place at the same time and feeding off each other. In these circumstances, we should be seeking not just to arrest the decline of local journalism, but identifying ways of regenerating local journalism."

The NUJ's eight-point plan also includes calls for a strengthened public interest test for newspaper takeovers, the maintenance of the BBC licence fee, a levy on commercial media operators and tax

breaks for local media that meet clearly defined public purposes.

Goldsmiths lecturer Natalie Fenton, who edited *New Media, Old News*, said local media must have the freedom to act in the public and not be "entirely beholden to commercial gain. There should be tax benefits and levies on companies to "support public service content and deliver quality local journalism."

All local newspaper mergers should have to pass a public interest test, she said.

General Secretary Jeremy Dear said the plan was "aimed at encouraging a variety of voices, across all platforms, a greater plurality, maximised through a combination of different ownership models – commercial, public, mutual, employee, co-operative, for profit and not for profit.

"Protection of the internet and journalism from commercial suffocation could create a vastly expanded and critically engaged public space operating in the public interest."



Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

The media's job is to inform and entertain us but we rely on them too to tell us what our rulers and representatives are up to. In the run-up to the Iraq war the government used spin and disinformation in the media to create panic and mislead people. The truth is coming out now, but we need stronger, more independent media to be able to scrutinise governments and make informed choices.

But this vital role for the media is under threat. The CPBF has produced this manifesto to help people raise the questions with politicians of all parties and press for the policies to enable the media to hold them accountable.

Let's make the media an election issue.

POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

"Labour's Lost It" The Sun announced on 30 September 2009. In a harsh reminder of the role Rupert Murdoch has played in UK politics since the 1970s, the paper's switch to the Conservatives was designed to inflict maximum damage on Labour at its annual conference.

Culture Secretary Ben Bradshaw warned: "The Tories have subcontracted their media and broadcasting policy to News International."

In 1992 the Sun had crowed "IT WAS THE SUN WOT WON IT" after its sustained anti-Labour campaign had helped return John Major to Downing Street.

Three years later Tony Blair flew half way around the world to court Rupert Murdoch's support for New Labour. Lance Price, a media adviser to Tony Blair, wrote that Rupert Murdoch was "like the 24th member of the cabinet. His voice was rarely heard ... but his presence was always felt".

The 2003 Communications Act was amended to include the infamous "Murdoch clause" which allows him to buy a terrestrial TV channel. Also after heavy lobbying, the Act enabled the formation of the single ITV company that has led to the alarming drop in standards (and audiences) on Channel 3.

Media policy should be shaped in the public interest, not in the interests of powerful companies.

THE CPBF'S 2010 MEDIA MANIFESTO

Changes in media policy should be decided through an open democratic process, with policies designed to protect and develop high quality, diverse media for the digital age.

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

The BBC's future

The BBC, cornerstone of the UK system of public service broadcasting, is under attack.

Of course some criticisms are justified – bloated executive pay and expenses, extravagant fees to BBC celebrities and unjustified spending on grandiose projects and property development.

But there are more important issues that make the defence of the BBC vital.

Attacks come from commercial media who claim that the very size of its operations threatens their business.

The real reason for the attacks on the BBC is that the range of channels, programmes, news and information on radio, television and online is enormously popular and trusted. It occupies a space within broadcasting which is free from advertising.

The BBC is an essential component of UK broadcasting and should continue to be funded by the licence fee. It should continue to provide a full range of broadcast programmes and digital services.

Funding public service media

A proposal to "top-slice" the BBC licence fee to fund local and regional news services (Independently Financed News Consortia or IFNCs) was proposed by the Labour government. A strong campaign against this has led to it being dropped.

There are plenty of other ways in which new forms of public service content could be funded and existing public service broadcasters like Channel 4 supported, along similar lines to the wind-fall taxes that government has imposed on energy companies and the banks.

- The broadcasting unions (the NUJ representing journalists and BECTU most other jobs) have proposed levies on recording equipment, blank media, pay TV revenues, advertising income or mobile phone operators.

- There could be a levy on the independent production companies that have got rich from publicly supported broadcasting, or on ITV's profiting from its archive of programmes made while it enjoyed its lucrative public licences. The government could lease rather than sell off the analogue spectrum released by the digital switchover

- Companies like Sky and Google could pay proper levels of tax.

The BBC licence fee must be used solely to fund the BBC's established broadcasting services and new online operations.

The government must examine the ways of funding content in the digital age and set up a system that taxes the companies who profit from it.

Media manifesto – 2

BROADCAST NEWS

Impartiality and Tory policy

Broadcasting regulations require that news on stations licensed by Ofcom must be impartial. The Tories have stated that “impartiality” requirements should be relaxed for broadcasters not receiving public funds.

Lifting these rules would pave the way for “Fox News UK” – for Sky or other commercial broadcasters to take broadcasting down the same right-wing populist road as sections of the British press.

To ensure that a diversity of views are reported, the impartiality regulations should continue to apply to all broadcasters licensed by Ofcom

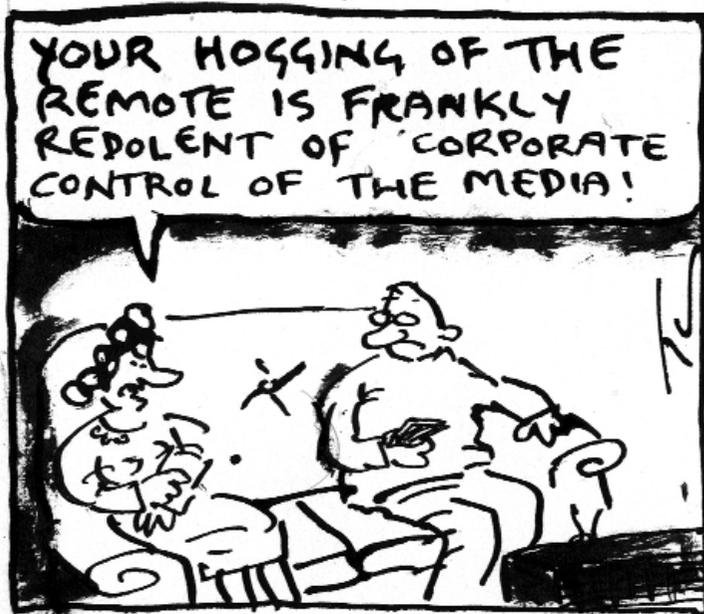
Independent Television News

ITV's national and international news comes from ITN, a separate company in which it has a 40% stake. The current contract expires in 2012 and Sky News can bid for the new one.

Last time round Sky put in such a low bid that ITV was able to force down the price it paid ITN, which led to reduced coverage and job losses.

Sky already has the contract to supply news for C5 bulletins and if it won the ITV contract it would threaten the highly-valued news ITN supplies to Channel 4.

It is vital for ITN to continue to provide high quality news for commercial TV. To prevent undercutting, a new Communications Act should require that the ITV news service must meet set levels of original material and international coverage.



NATIONAL, REGIONAL, LOCAL

The UK media are centralised to a high degree around London and the provision of news and current affairs coverage in the nations and regions of the UK – both quantity and quality, in print and on the air – is falling fast.

This in part due to the crisis in the local press and the demise of the ITV companies, whose role in reinforcing regional identities and cultures has been all but abandoned.

It is also the result of the failure of central government to safeguard the arts and media of the nations and regions.

To substitute for this, the devolved governments of the UK should have the power to oversee their own media policies.

There should be national and regional Communication Councils, composed of representatives of the widest possible range of society, which would oversee the raising and distribution of money to ensure the development of public service media serving their areas.

Local and regional News

Local news is essential for democracy but it's dying on its feet. More than 100 local papers have closed. ITV is dodging its contractual requirement to provide regional news, and commercial radio coverage has been reduced to gestures. Local websites are springing up but they're making little money and have nothing like the journalistic resources the papers used to have.

ITV and the newspaper owners blame the double blow of the advertising recession and competition from the internet, but they ignore a third factor: themselves.

In the good years they turned over their astounding profits – often more than 30 per cent on turnover – to shareholders, fuelling a wave of takeovers that has left the industry in the hands of a few debt-ridden, greedy companies. These are continuing to slash away at costs, cutting the journalistic staff.

ITV has decimated its local news-

rooms and reduced the spread of bulletins. Ofcom, which is supposed to enforce the terms of the licences, has meekly gone along with it.

The government has a modest programme for funding new consortia to provide multi-media regional news services to replace ITV. The Conservatives say they will stop them: they want to leave local news to the “market” – to the companies that have done the damage. And they want to scrap regulations restricting the further concentration of ownership.

The BBC still puts resources into local news and advanced a plan for local video news services but it was killed off as supposedly “unfair competition” to commercial media. But competition in news is what is needed: it should not be left to the BBC.

The regulations that limit the concentration of ownership of local media should not be relaxed. Public funding must not be used to bail out ITV or regional newspaper groups.

There should be incentives for new local news initiatives – in print, radio and/or online – in the form of tax breaks, regional development grants or loans, or the use of existing production facilities. All ventures financed from any public source should comply with a range of conditions, to include commitments to local news, adequate staffing and the fair payment and treatment of staff and contributors.

The BBC should be allowed to go ahead with its project to develop local video news channels and maintain its local web presence.

DIGITAL BRITAIN

The media landscape is in upheaval. Digital technology is opening up an uncertain future, in which familiar formats – newspapers, television, and radio – are converging, and merging with blogs, online news, complex websites and interactive entertainment. This is putting the principles of public service media, universal access and citizenship at the mercy of commercial interests.

There are two big questions:

- How to fund and build a high speed broadband infrastructure (Next Generation Access or NGA) that is accessible to all. The UK government is committed to private funding, but the private sector will want to pay only for the profitable bits.
- How to close the “digital divide”.

Media manifesto – 3

The gap between the haves and have-nots is widening, with the market delivering to affluent and highly populated urban areas. Delivery of broadband access cannot just be left to the market.

Government must ensure that high speed broadband is available to everyone regardless of location and income.

This expansion should be funded by levies on network internet service providers and media and communications companies.

THREATS TO MEDIA FREEDOM

Libel laws

Britain's libel laws are having an increasingly chilling effect on journalism. Research carried out by Oxford University suggests that the cost of defending a libel action is 140 times the European average. This often means that publishers will settle actions because the cost of defending them is prohibitive.

London also offers the dubious service of "libel tourism" whereby foreign corporations and wealthy individuals can pursue lucrative actions over overseas publications that may have had a negligible readership in the UK.

These abuses were highlighted in a recent report from Index on Censorship and English PEN, following which Justice Secretary Jack Straw pledged to bring in reforms restricting the amounts lawyers can charge for bringing successful actions.

The commitment to change legal procedures to reduce drastically the media's costs in defending libel actions must be carried out. Further reforms should end the right of big companies to bring libel actions to silence their critics.

The anti-terrorist threat

Visual journalism is under attack. Across the country people with cameras – amateurs and professionals, landscape, architectural and street photographers – are being targeted as potential terrorists by police invoking anti-terrorist legislation. When there are complaints, police agree to allow professionals to work without hindrance, but such promises mean little on the streets.

There are a number of laws intended to prevent people gathering information for the purpose of terrorism that are being used instead to harass photographers and videographers going about their business. These laws threaten everybody's rights.

Police forces should be required to respect the right of photographers – or anybody – to take pictures unhindered in a public place. The anti-terrorist laws that criminalise people engaged in exercising their basic civil rights should be repealed.

Transparency in lobbying

The content of all media is increasingly dominated by the public relations industry, as redundancies and rising workloads among journalists leave them with less time to do their job of independent reporting properly.

The political agenda is being set more and more by lobbyists, working in a £2 billion industry to influence decisions and the way they are reported.

There are few rules governing their activities and no requirement for lobbyists to register or disclose their

clients or activities. The Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) has investigated and concluded that "there is a genuine issue of concern that there is an inside track who wield privileged access and disproportionate influence".

The committee's report called for a statutory system of disclosure that would require all lobbyists to register who is lobbying whom and how much is being spent in the process, but nothing has happened.

The new government should legislate to enact the PASC recommendation for a statutory system of disclosure by all lobbyists in Westminster and the devolved assemblies.



The CPBF Media Manifesto should be used as widely as possible to inform debate during the election campaign. It is online as a pdf at www.cpbef.org.uk, and further copies, in bulk if needed, can be obtained from the campaign. Email freepress@cpbf.org.uk The CPBF can supply speakers for meetings or other contacts for campaigning on the media.

Media manifesto – 4

REGULATION

The future of Ofcom

As media converge it makes sense to have a single regulator to oversee the extraordinary technological changes that are taking place, to ensure that the important social and cultural dimensions of the media are developed and protected.

At present Ofcom works to a deregulatory, business-friendly 'light touch' agenda, with great emphasis on the consumer but scant regard for the democratic, social and cultural dimensions of communications. Ofcom also lacks any democratic accountability.

But even this is too much for the Conservatives, who have pledged to abolish Ofcom, or at least strip it of all its policy-making powers. This is of a number of concessions to Rupert Murdoch's News International, which has said it wants a 'bonfire' of media regulations.

The CPBF takes a different view. Positive programme regulation can deliver a range of diverse, high-quality public service content.

The government has announced it will introduce product placement, allowing marketers to pay for brand presence in TV programmes. This retrograde step, which the CPBF with many others has opposed for years, will damage editorial integrity, artistic freedom, and the quality and independence of programmes.

Ofcom's remit needs to be drastically changed to make it a democratically accountable body, and to redefine its primary job as the promotion of the public interest in mass communications into the converged digital future."

Ofcom must change its procedures to recruit staff and appoint people to its consultative committees who appreciate the social and cultural dimensions of communications and who represent the interests of citizens.

The decision to allow product placement in TV programmes must be reversed quickly after the election.

The Press Complaints Commission

The PCC is funded by the newspaper industry and its *raison d'être* is to defend the newspaper industry's interests. It is, in fact, a complaints mediation service that describes itself as a self-regulatory body when statutory regulation threatens. Its effectiveness in promoting ethical journalistic standards is widely questioned, and its operations have been

heavily criticised in a recent report by the Commons Culture, Media and Sport select committee.

The PCC should be wound up and replaced with an effective self-regulatory body which earns the respect of newspaper and magazine readers, the general public and journalists alike. It should have clear powers to order meaningful recompense to complainants, including fines for blatant breaches of the editors' Code of Practice.

The new body would also ensure that the right of reply, a measure for which the CPBF has campaigned since its inception, is established in the case of complaints concerning factual inaccuracy.

One of the consequences of convergence has been the growth of newspaper websites with audio and visual content which like their papers are highly partisan and carry salacious material that broadcasters would be prevented by regulations from putting on the air. The only regulation to which they are subject as part of newspaper operations is the "self-regulation" of the PCC.

At election times the news on regulated broadcast media is required to be balanced between the political parties, but the newspaper websites and their embedded TV and radio channels are not.

The TV, radio and audio-visual services on newspaper websites should come under the regulatory oversight of a reformed Ofcom. Electoral law needs to be amended to encompass newspaper websites and require them to provide balanced, impartial news and comment at election times.

The BBC Trust

The BBC Trust was established in 2006 to replace the Board of Governors. Its creation was very much a political act in the turbulent aftermath of the Hutton Inquiry, the report into the death of government scientist Dr David Kelly that slammed the BBC over its reporting of the build-up to the Iraq war.

The Trust was given powers essentially to oversee, limit and control the corporation. Any attempt to introduce new BBC services has to be subjected to 'pub-



lic service tests' and 'market impact assessments' and a number have been blocked.

These have included a digital educational service, BBC Jam, and a plan to introduce hyper-local video news services around the UK. (Another innovation, a video-on-demand service called Project Kangaroo to be run jointly with ITV and C4, was killed by the Competition Commission.)

Ofcom also has oversight of the BBC in matters concerning broadcasting standards and service for consumers.

The BBC Trust should be abolished and the BBC be removed from Ofcom's remit. A new democratically elected body should regulate the BBC and ensure that the BBC can provide a full range of public service programming on TV, radio and online and is protected from assaults by politicians and commercial interests.

WHO ARE WE?

The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom was founded in 1979. It is the leading independent organisation dealing with questions of freedom, diversity and accountability in the UK media. It is membership-based, drawing its support from individuals, trade unions and community based organisations. It develops policies to encourage more pluralistic media and regularly intervenes in public debates over the future of broadcasting in the UK.

FINDING A COMMUNITY IS SECRET OF SUCCESS

JOURNALISM can survive in a world where the big corporations have failed it, a London conference was told. New Ways to Make Journalism Pay, organised by the NUJ London Freelance Branch, heard from a dozen journalists who were making a good living from do-it-yourself media.

Dominic Ponsford, editor of the *Press Gazette*, told of how the "ailing" magazine that had been turned around by becoming "part of an online conversation", with a "mass audience online" for (free) news, an "elite audience in print" and a daily email newsletter.

Former *Yorkshire Post* business editor David Parkin said a recession was "one of the best times to launch a business: if it can work in a recession it can work in other times too."

He launched Yorkshire website thebusinessdesk.com in 2007 and it has built its "community" to the point where it commands £2,500 for a banner ad for a few weeks. It's the "quality rather than quantity" of its 28,000 readers that attracted advertisers, he said.

Daniel Johnston set up Indus Delta, a micro-niche website for the welfare to work community, a new industry in which "nobody knew what was going on." Now it has 3,000 subscribers to its (free) weekly email newsletter and 8,000 monthly online readers and is attracting advertisers.

Even blogs can be made to pay. Paul Staines told how he makes a living as Guido Fawkes, the sometimes controversial Tory blog. The key is "the big audience, with content that people have to have," he said. Income is derived from advertising, merchandising and selling exclusive stories to the tabloids.

Fellow blogger Conrad Quilty-Harper spoke of working for techie blogs such as Engadget. "You need a niche, you need to preserve exclusivity," he said.

"The secret of the blog's success was in building a strong community. The site had free content and search engine-optimised headlines to ensure enough posts to make "real money" from Google Ads.

There's even a good business in traditional newspapers run by committed small companies rather than the big corporations. Self-styled "old lefty" Eric Gordon set up the *Camden New Journal* in London in 1982 after a strike and it's going strong. Turnover is "a couple of million a year," he said, and attributes this to having no shareholders to satisfy.

Angie Sammons, on the other hand, edits a local news website, Liverpool Confidential website, which has 120,000 readers, of whom 22,000 are prepared to pay for content. Most of the profits are "ploughed back into stories the local newspapers have forgotten about."



'Old lefty' Eric Gordon (right) tells hopefuls how to run their own papers, with (from left) Alex Klaushofer (NUJ), Angie Sammons and Adam Christie (NUJ).

Digital Bill

From page one

obliging internet service providers (ISPs) to police file-sharing is likely to bring aggravation rather than aid.

A smarter government than New Labour's might have tried to reinvent copyright for the 21st century rather than merely to buttress it.

A smarter government might have realised that throwing the law at file-sharers won't stop them, and that a more imaginative solution is required.

Far from oiling the wheels of the digital economy, the bill will create obstacles for the innovators who make the digital economy grow.

The main instrument for this is the so-called Next Generation Access (NGA, the roll-out of high-speed broadband).

But the NGA programme is not even in the bill, which focuses only on the regulation of the network.

Without NGA there can be no digital economy worthy of the name, but the government is still trying to figure out how to pay for the technology that Ofcom will regulate, and without funding the UK has fallen behind in the broadband race.

Other countries already have, or are planning, public networks capable of up to 100 megabits per second connection (mbps), compared to the UK's current average of about 4mbps.

Last year's Digital Britain report proposed to levy fixed-line telephone users £6 a year (plus VAT) to pay to complete NGA, at a speed of 2mbps, by 2012.

Universal superfast broadband would follow, to cover 90 per cent of the country by 2017, leading to a consumer boom, an explosion of digital products and services, and the instant regeneration of the British economy.

But who pays for all this? No one knows. Estimates suggest that the combined cost may be up to £60 billion.

The telephone levy will raise about £180 million and the other proposed source of funding (a surplus in the BBC digital switchover fund) will raise about £200 million.

And the private sector will want to pay only for the profitable bits – the 50 per cent of homes that Virgin are targeting, or the 40 per cent that are targeted by BT – leaving huge areas uncovered.

One thing that has survived in the bill, so far, is the governments Independently Financed News Consortia, to provide local TV news.

But guess what? There's nothing on how they will be financed.

Debate

'Wrong to run the Mohammed cartoon'

Granville Williams in his review of *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (FP 174) rightly claims that the controversy surrounding the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in *Jyllands-Posten* "needs a wider context". Bizarrely, the context to which he refers is only about the need for "free and open expression" and makes no mention at all of the Islamophobia, endemic in many Western countries, which is at the heart of the debate and which explains the reaction, by all sides, to the publication of the cartoons.

Even worse, FP, in its determination to show that it will not be cowed by the supposed intimidation of "Islamic rabble-rousers", actually prints one of the cartoons. Given that not a single UK newspaper dared to take such a "bold" stand, does this suggest that the British media is somehow afraid to confront Moslem "extremists" and is dominated by a politically correct mindset when it comes to Islam?

Of course not. The British media are full of inflammatory drivel about Islam from the *Dispatches* programmes claiming that extremist Imams are hell-bent on the Islamification of Britain to the outpouring of coverage over Islam4UK's Anjem Choudary and his shameless, publicity-seeking threat to lead a march in Wooten Bassett.

Readers of FP might like to know that there was a debate before a decision was taken to include one of the controversial cartoons.

One of the members of the National

Council justified his support for publication by referring to "the fear which writers and artists of all sorts now experience – either directly or indirectly – when they make any comment of any kind which might be taken to be critical of Islam or Muslims."

But where is the evidence of systematic intimidation of British journalists? Where is the evidence that reporters are somehow living in fear from Islamic retribution when a critical story is written about Islam?

Those who have more reason to fear are the Muslims who are the direct victims of race hate crimes.

In this situation, who poses the gravest danger to the free speech of UK citizens – a handful of Islamic preachers or a racist movement fomented by the

BNP that is dedicated to harassing and intimidating British Muslims?

Freedom of speech, despite the claims of well-intentioned liberals, is not an abstract, universal principle but an instrumental right that should be claimed only insofar as it promotes justice, equality, solidarity and, crucially, does not prevent marginalized groups from realizing these values.

The publication of one of the Danish cartoons in FP is an embarrassment and does nothing to promote the underlying democratic values of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. We all want a media that is robust, fearless and independent but we also want a media that takes side with some of the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Des Freedman and David Crouch

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

AGM 2010

Saturday June 26, 10am to 1pm
at the Union Tavern, 52 Lloyd Baker Street, London WC1X 9AA,
at the junction with Kings Cross Road

For more information and booking go to freepress@cpbf.org.uk

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