

Digital Television: the principles for spectrum planning.

Comments by Channel M, TV for Manchester.

Use of spectrum for broadcasting.

- a. It has long been a broadcasting policy objective to provide sufficient spectrum to ensure universal national coverage for public service television in the UK.
- b. This universality principle has also applied at a regional level – both ITV and BBC provide regional services and in 1991 ITV companies secured their regional licences on the basis of analogue spectrum for broadcasting universally within their designated region.
- c. The creation of Channel 5 broke from this policy – due to frequency shortages, it was awarded a licence without universal national coverage.
- d. Similarly, in 1996, the rule of universal regional coverage was broken by the creation of the television restricted service licence.
- e. This licence is awarded for a particular locality - but in most cases the frequencies allocated to licence-holders have turned out to be inadequate to ensure satisfactory reception within that locality.
- f. Nonetheless it is widely agreed that restricted service licences have been beneficial - the ITC's recent Citizen Jury reported that viewers would welcome more local channels *as well as* existing regional ITV services.
- g. Such local channel's provision of new public service elements, which cannot be provided by ITV or BBC regional operations, mean these channels are, in effect, the sixth free-to-view service.
- h. How then, can we ensure that is digital spectrum is made available for such channels in future?**

Introduction.

1. The restricted service licence utilises 'spare' analogue frequencies. It is a four-year licence, offered by the ITC on a pre-emptible basis – that is, the 'spare' frequencies could be re-allocated to digital if required.
2. Further, those analogue frequencies that are available for restricted service licences are allocated according to a seven-point list of priorities introduced by the Department of Culture Media and Sport in 1997.
3. This list places restricted services in seventh place – any other user of takes priority over the RSL.

Channel M.

1. Channel M applied for its restricted service licence in September 1997 and was the sixth RSL to launch in February 2000.
2. The channel provides a local television service for Manchester. Guardian Media Group, through the Manchester Evening News, has funded it and its educational partner is the University of Salford's Faculty of Media and Performance.
3. The channel was allocated a frequency that was not meeting the coverage prediction made by frequency planners in 1997.
4. Efforts to change the frequency have failed because suitable frequencies in Manchester are already allocated to existing self-help schemes, radio microphone systems and analogue relays - each of which has a higher priority on the DCMS list.

Limitations of the analogue RSL.

- a. The frequencies allocated to the RSL are not usually adequate to sustain a viable commercial local service with a free-to-air analogue service for a particular locality.

- b. In an ideal world, restricted analogue coverage could be supplemented by cable carriage making the local channel generally available throughout its approved transmission service area.
- c. In practice cable operators have refused allocate digital capacity to local channels - they say they need all their digital channels for more lucrative pay-per-view services.
- d. This means cable distribution is generally not available to local channel operators.
- e. Further, because the regulator regards RSL services as short-term, four-year experiments, it has been difficult to create a realistic business plan to attract investors.
- f. As the RSL frequencies are pre-emptible there also remains a considerable risk to investors in such services.
- g. Finally, because there is currently no digital equivalent of the RSL, there is uncertainty over the long-term future of the current analogue local channels.
- h. Consequently, the results of this consultation are critical in terms of determining the future of the analogue local channels which are currently on air – as well as laying out a framework for future digital local channels.

Digital options that are not available for local channels.

- a. It is our experience that the most obvious routes to digital are currently not available to local channels.
- b. Digital cable could provide localised carriage – but local channels cannot compete for capacity with the potential returns of pay-per-view channels.
- c. Digital terrestrial and digital satellite are technically unable to provide localised services – they are national platforms.

The principles of spectrum planning for local services.

Question 1. Our working assumption is that planning will continue for six multiplexes, as today. However we would be interested in views on the cost and benefits of a more

radical re-planning. This could be either reducing or increasing the number of multiplexes by one. Do you have views on this?

- a. It would be our preference that a new multiplex should be created - along the lines of the suggestion in paragraph 2.6 - and that it should create an opportunity for more free-to-view public services.**
- b. We note that the consultation document assumes such additional free-to-view public services would give Teletext, S4C and Channel 5 room to expand their services – we would like local channels to be included in this list.**

- i. If there were an additional multiplex, with more free-to-view capacity, capacity should be guaranteed for extra local channels.
- ii. Without such provision we cannot see where sufficient capacity will be obtained for local channels to have a role in UK broadcasting after digital switch-over.

Question 4. To what extent should the future planning of this spectrum take into account the provision of local services?

- a. As the operator of one of a handful of pioneering local channels, we find it difficult to understand that there could be any dissent to the proposal that local services should be taken into account in digital planning.
- b. However, because so little account was taken of the frequency problems facing in the 1996 legislation, it has been extremely difficult to establish a viable local service to date.
- c. The flawed frequency planning for analogue restricted services should not be repeated in spectrum planning for digital switch-over.

There are two fundamental provisions we would like to see included in any digital spectrum planning:

- Local channels should be recognised as having the same validity as the other free-to-air services and should not be treated differently in frequency planning.
- Planning for digital television should ensure that sufficient digital capacity is set aside for local channel to be available across the entire country.

Specific proposals.

- Spectrum allocated to free-to-view digital television should be sufficient to ensure local channels can obtain carriage on fair and equitable terms.
- Further research is required to establish how much digital capacity would be needed to ensure that a local channel could be licenced for all major towns and cities in the UK. To do so, a statutory guarantee of a fixed percentage of capacity may be necessary.
- There is a parallel, for instance, in the combination of Channel 4 and the statutory quota of 25 percent for independent production, which together produced a strong independent production sector in the UK.
- Similarly, a new multiplex with guaranteed capacity for local channels would – if added to legislation for a digital cable ‘must-carry rule’ and a new ten year local channel licence – lay strong foundations for a viable third tier of broadcasting in the UK.

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