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Jane Humphreys, DTI
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Digital Television Spectrum Planning Paper

I would like to make some comments on the Spectrum Planning paper.

My name is Chris Playll and, although these are my personal views, I have 30 years experience in the broadcasting industry, the first 25 years at the BBC. I was a manager in the BBC Post Production department and was, for several years, responsible for the video tape transmission playout area at Television Centre. My comments are on section 3 of the paper concerning the coverage of digital terrestrial broadcasting.

I believe that there should be the minimum level of coverage and that it should remain at 99.4%. When the UHF analogue transmission network was developed a limit to the level of provision was set that balanced the cost to the broadcaster against the number of viewers served by each transmitter. I do not believe that these factors would be significantly different now.

It would be unreasonable to take away services that already exist. In addition the broadcasters already have the sites, aerials, power supplies and much of the required equipment already in place. Reducing the coverage is simply a means of transferring costs from the broadcaster to the viewer. The recent removal of subsidies to non-subscribers by Sky Digital makes the use of satellite for only free to air services an expensive option.

Any reduction in the 99.4% target would require more viewers to rely on digital satellite, cable or self help schemes.

Hopefully existing self help schemes could be modified for digital transmissions. In some rural areas satellite reception for community self help schemes might be appropriate. The free to air services could be decoded centrally and distributed to users. The costs for this need to be established as well any contractual or licensing issues. In small isolated communities the decoded satellite free to air services could be distributed by re-broadcasting

on low power transmitters.

Analogue Switch Off

I have read the ITC Genesis report and the various switch-off scenarios proposed in that document. I would, however, like to suggest a simpler, but more radical plan.

To achieve the 99.4% target it seems that all 1100 transmitters sites will need to be converted for digital operation. It seems likely that digital transmission can only cover about 80% of the population, without removing analogue services in order to re-use of the frequencies.

However good any public information campaign was, simultaneously switching off all 4 analogue services, nationally, or by regions, would cause considerable problems for viewers and result in a sudden demand on retailers and equipment suppliers.

My plan would be:

1. Choose a small group of analogue relay transmitters where no digital transmitters have been installed. At these sites, switch off BBC 2 and Channel 4 services and replace them with Multiplexes 1 and 2.

This would leave BBC1 and ITV1 unaffected so no viewer would be left without any television service.

Viewers in the areas affected would then need to purchase set top boxes or subscribe to satellite or cable to receive BBC2, Channel 4 and the extra free to air services.

The actual channels used could be rearranged so that the digital multiplexes were on their correct final channels. The multiplexes would operate at their full power so that there would be no need to modify transmitters at a later date. Publicity for this change would indicate to the public that the analogue switch off was a reality, although only a small number of viewers would be initially affected.

2. Over the next year or two, installation teams would then move to the other small transmitters to repeat the process until all 1000 relay transmitters had been modified

The government could assist this process by loaning set top boxes to the elderly

and other disadvantaged groups for a short period. These converter boxes could be reclaimed later and reused in other areas as the changeover progresses.

By staggering the changeover it could be argued that, throughout the process, 99.4% of viewers would have access to the existing free to air services, meeting the government target.

At the end of this phase all transmitter sites would have at least 2 digital multiplexes and 80% of the population would have not yet been affected.

At this point it will be possible to accurately identify which areas would not receive a digital service at the completion of the analogue switch-off. This would enable those affected to consider installing satellite reception or taking part in a community self help scheme.

3. BBC2 and Channel 4 would then be progressively switched off at the main 120 sites. This will enable Multiplexes 1 and 2 to be transmitted at full power on the vacated channels.

Again the loss of two existing channels would be more likely to persuade viewers to "go digital" than the prospect of extra channels.

At this point the BBC could schedule a separate analogue service to provide a "Best of BBC" service on their remaining analogue channel. ITV1 and Channel 4 might consider a similar co-operation.

4. Eventually the BBC2 and Channel 4 analogue service would have been switched off nationally. The remaining BBC and ITV analogue services could continue until either pay TV services wished to increase the power of their multiplexes or if the frequencies were allocated to non-TV services.

I hope my comments are a useful contribution.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Playl

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