



## Response to Ofcom consultation

### Radio: the implications of *Digital Britain* for localness regulation

October 2009

The Radio Independents Group (RIG) is the trade body representing the interests of the independent radio and audio production companies of the UK.

Over the last 15 years this sector has grown from a handful of companies and freelancers, into a vibrant and forward-looking industry of some 150 companies, spread around the UK.

Along with the DCMS' consultation on IFNCs, this review is a timely opportunity to examine the necessary regulatory steps to ensuring a range and diversity of competitive services and programming across the UK.

#### **Encouraging new UK-wide services**

With members based around the country, RIG firmly believes in the value of a having a range of voices and viewpoints expressed. This helps to bring the country closer together and promote understanding and knowledge about how other people live.

It also means that those producers who wish to retain that distinctive voice by remaining in their own locality are able to do so.

The coming together of regional stations will in one sense enable a greater audience to hear different voices from around the country, and on this basis we would welcome the steps described in the consultation.

However, when the consultation states "*Being carried on national DAB, these stations' local content would become less of a defining characteristic*", we would want to be sure that Ofcom understood the difference between content made locally and with local characteristics, but which can still be enjoyed by a national audience, and local content which focusses exclusively on issues and characters to which only people from that specific locality could relate. There is no reason why there could not continue to be a high volume of the former type of content, which would serve to maintain and even increase the diversity of radio content available to the UK listener.

We agree that the radio services described must be competitive, and this must relate to the commissioning of suppliers. Programmes must still be made across as diverse a geographical area of the UK as possible. We would therefore wish there to be safeguards against a concentration of commissioning of programmes from one particular region or producers within a region. To ensure this is the case, it is crucial that commissioners fully engage with the independent radio production sector. A regulatory framework in which independent production had to be embraced in each region, as part of a way of safeguarding the geographical diversity of output on digital networks, would simultaneously be a way of: reaching out to communities; saving costs; and (through regular competition and tendering) should ensure that programming does not become homogenised through a limited range of commissioning.

We would also like to see a certain level of opt-outs maintained, including regional investigative documentary strands.

### **Regulating for localness within a sustainable local tier**

We accept the principle of local FM stations co-locating and sharing programming within a defined set of areas and feel the map set out in the consultation is reasonable.

In relation to news content, in our response to the DCMS consultation on Independently Funded News Consortia, RIG made the point that it was important not just to have regional news funded, but also to have funds made available for investigate documentary programming, for example a weekly programme reporting on a current affairs issue of local interest. We would like to see consideration given to including an obligation for a certain amount of such programming to be provided.

Competing investigative journalism strands – one via the BBC and another via independent local radio (ILR) within each region – would ensure that there was a high standard of reporting and a drive to uncover the `best stories. These strands would also need to be regularly exposed to a competitive licence/tendering process in which independent production companies and in house BBC/ILR teams would be able to bid for public funds to provide these services upon BBC and ILR platforms. This will avoid the creation of a monopolistic supply structure.

### **Contact**

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