Ofcom comes out fighting

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2007/11/22/ofcom-comes-out-fighting/

Ofcom boss Ed Richards was in feisty mood for his conversation at Polis. "It is difficult to get politicians to take the future seriously" he warned. European Commission plans for a Super-regulator are 'dangerous' and 'retrograde' he added. For a man with a reputation as the ultimate technocrat and policy wonk this was passonate stuff.

Ofcom are under pressure. The regulator for non-BBC broadcasting and telecoms has just had its idea for a Public Service Provider rejected by a committee of MPs. The EU telecoms commissioner Viviane Reding has said that national regulators like Ofcom have failed consumers. No wonder the Media Guardian has said that Richards 'must try harder'.

Well Richards was certainly trying hard in his Polis debate. He made it clear that he thinks that the MPs simply don't understand that the whole media environment is changing and that we might be left with just the BBC as a sole bastion of public service broadcasting. "If we applied their way of thinking in the past we would never have set up the BBC because when it started it only served a small audience" he said. He made an interesting argument for why society should consider investing in more, not less public service:

> *"The old analogue system is falling in to disrepair, it's not sustainable. How do you meet the needs of the digital age? We have to ask if the market is providing sufficient public serivice media for what we want as a society. The country is better off with a mix of public and private public service broadcasting. In the end the Government will make the decision but it is incumbent upon us to develop more thinking on the Public Service Provider"*

He was able to describe the core idea of the PSP. It's role will be to support or commission public service content for a variety of platforms. It may be a new organisation or the role may be taken by an existing body. However, he was unable to tell us exactly what the PSP will look like. Ofcom are piloting models and it will interesting to see what emerges. Of course, some people are opposed in principle because they think it will restrict the flowering of private sector enterprise. Or they oppose the idea in practice because they think it will be unworkable.

Likewise, Ofcom (and the rest of us) have a tough call to make on regulation of the Internet. Richards' analysis was clear but he refused to come down on one side or the other.

> *"Like it or not there are a series of states who have proved that it is possible to regulate the Internet: China, Saudi Arabia and North Korea. They have all done it in highly undesirable ways but they have proved that it is possible. But should it be regulated at all? Five years ago we would have said no. But that was when the Internet was used by a small number of geeks. Now it is mainstream and part of our lives, especially in homes with children. It is time to think about this carefully."*

On the other hand, Richards warned of "an air of moral panic" around about the Internet and he suggested that you could have positive results through self-regulation or improved media literacy.

We will be publishing a short paper based on the event shortly – thanks again to Chime Communications for their support.

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