



UK Coalition for Cultural Diversity
www.ukccd.org

To the Editor
The Guardian

Dear Sir,

Amongst the myriad agendas latent in Stephen Carter's Digital Britain Report, lurks a justification for top slicing the BBC in the interests of a free handout from the taxpayer to British Telecom for the privilege of developing what is already their future business interest.

When the taxpayer was committed to bailing out the economy, there were at least some strings attached. As proposed, this handout, in the name of digital democracy, comes at the expense both of the taxpayer and of Britain's most important cultural institution, the BBC. Yet there are clearly alternative solutions.

Stephen Carter fails to consider that players in the booming digital markets, like the telecommunications companies, the ISPs, cable and satellite channels, should make a contribution to supporting local content in the interests of the citizens and audiovisual creators they benefit from. The size of these companies shrinks the BBC's budget into insignificance. Last year British Telecom's turnover was around £20 billion and Google generated £1.25 billion in revenue in the UK alone, whilst returning a mere £600,000 to the Treasury. Yet the ISPs and non-terrestrial channels invest little or nothing in our creative programming. They prefer instead to recycle content, most of which is imported, and largely from America. Imposing a 1% levy, for example, on mobile phone operators alone would produce £210 million, and, in exchange, could give them privileged access to the content they depend on - a win-win solution.

Whatever the digital platform for distribution, there needs to be fair and proportionate investment in local content from all commercial, audiovisual players – in film, drama, investigative journalism, local news, games and children's programming. This is the only way to protect the diversity of cultural expression to which we are committed as signatories of UNESCO's Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expression, and which plays a critical role in promoting tolerance and understanding in our mixed communities. The market will not, and does not, provide for such content. Several of our OECD partners, including Spain, France, Italy, Poland and Canada, have been quicker to acknowledge this, and have already imposed a system of levies.

Lord Carter's underlying intent, to rebrand the BBC licence fee as a general "funding mechanism for public content", is not only unimaginative but endangers the innovative role which the BBC currently plays in the development of enterprise and creative industry in this country. Through the investment of around £2 billion of the license fee in local, original creative content, involving input from the range of the creative industries and outsourcing 75% of this content to independents, the BBC returns huge economic benefits to UK citizens even before the value of its cultural impact is added.

Caught up in the pixel beams of digital, internet communication, Lord Carter's report overlooks the interdependence of content provider and platform/distributor and the interest of our citizens in making all pay fairly and proportionately to safeguard the quality of our digital environment. Like the air we breathe, it needs to be defended.

Yours sincerely

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