

Ed Vaizey's speech to the Digital Audio Broadcasting: A sustainable future broadcasting model for Europe conference – by Video

Wednesday, 26. November 2014

Representation of the Free State of Bavaria to the European Union, Brussels.

Good Morning, my name is Ed Vaizey. I am the UK Minister of Culture and I am doing this video because unfortunately I can't be with you. So I apologise to all of you and to Secretary of State Ptschierer that I can't be there.

I wanted to talk to you about the experience of digital radio in the UK and also to welcome Germany's push towards digital radio, which I think will be of enormous importance in the growth of digital radio in Europe.

In the UK, we have really for the last 10 years been expanding digital radio and putting in place policies that encourage its growth. I really wanted to cover the 4 main areas on which we focused before turning to the wider agenda. I call the 4 areas the 4 C's, because it helps me to remember them. That means: coverage, cars, consumers and content.

And let me explain what I mean by those. Coverage is about making sure that the reception, the quality of listening for digital radio is as good as it is for FM and we are close to achieving that goal. And coverage is at two levels, the national level for the national radio stations, and the local level for local radio stations.

As far as national coverage is concerned for the BBC, which takes the vast amount of national radio listening, coverage will be built out to 97.5 % of FM equivalence and the BBC has been responsible for that. We are working with commercial radio to get close to their equivalence of FM coverage, something like 90/91% of the country and again we are getting very close to that.

On local coverage we are close to signing a deal involving the BBC, commercial radio stations and the government itself to extend local coverage from what it is at the moment, about 70 % to around 90 % over the next 12-18 months. So that will make a significant difference.

The absolute key for digital radio is that consumer knows that they are going to get as good coverage on their digital radio as they would if they were to listen on FM. So that's point number one.

Point number 2, are cars because for radio, unlike obviously for television, a lot of the content is consumed in the car and it's absolutely vital that we get as many people listening to digital radio in the car.

So we've engaged with motor manufacturers and one of the key changes that we have seen over the last 12 months is that very few cars came with digital radio fitted

as standard, and now in the UK the majority of new cars, around 60 %, come with a digital radio fitted as standard. That is a huge step change.

But of course we have a legacy, we have millions of cars that are a few years older, and what we need to do is work with manufacturers to make it as quick and easy and cheap as possible to install digital radios in older cars, to replace the analogue radio with digital radio. Again we are making progress on that and again we hope to see a step change.

The third C is the consumer. And we want to give the consumer the reassurance that the radios they buy are of high quality. So we have launched what we call the digital tick.

We have launched it with the industry to show consumers that when they buy a radio, they are going to get all the services that they expect of a digital radio, that its going to be of the quality that they want it to be.

And that's going to be a great asset I think, to retailers who want to push radios at a time like this when we approach Christmas and to radio manufacturers.

And finally there's content, again one of the big things that drove the drive to digital in television was the number of channels you could get if you switched to digital.

Its not quite the same with radio, but it is changing. We see for example that one of the BBC's digital stations, 6 Music, is now more popular than one of its analogue radio stations, BBC Radio 3.

I think it is one of the first digital stations to get more than 1 million listeners and we now have a lot of commercial stations that are becoming almost as popular as their analogue cousins.

So that is a very important driver as well, to show consumers the kind of choice they can get if they get a digital radio. So those are the four elements that are driving digital coverage in the UK.

Clearly we are not going to force a digital switchover against the will of the consumer. We have always said that the listener will drive the change to digital and we have set benchmarks of 50 % of listening and adequate coverage. We are close to reaching 50 % and we might reach it in the next couple of years.

Certainly in London we are pretty much at 50 % and London also has more digital stations (65) than any other city in the world, which is pretty impressive. I think what will give us another boost is more and more European countries moving towards digital.

We have seen some of the Scandinavian countries like Norway and Denmark moving towards digital, and that is incredibly welcome.

But clearly Germany is the biggest country in Europe, the biggest economy in Europe and a move towards digital would be an outstanding contribution to getting the whole of Europe to adopt digital radio.

And the reason we want to work with Europe and to work with our neighbours in Europe, comes down to four elements.

One is the car, which I have already mentioned. If car manufacturers know that not just the UK market, but the whole of the European market is embracing digital, then I think we will see the real shift towards new cars coming with digital as standard. We will also see a shift in investment to car conversion kits, bringing down the price and making it much easier to convert your existing car radio to digital.

We will also see investment from the broadcasters. I think if the public service radio stations and the commercial radio stations know that shift is toward digital across Europe, they will really start to invest in the infrastructure.

And finally, I think we will see great progress made on technical standards. It's important that we all come together to share technical standards so that digital radio can be used wherever you are in Europe.

I am really excited about this conference, and very sorry that I can't be with you in person. My officials are with you and I hope to hear back from them that it was a very successful conference and I hope to work with my German colleagues on pushing the case for digital in Europe.

Thank you very much