

Setting the record straight on the WRC-12 and Terrestrial Broadcasting in the context of the European Radio Spectrum Policy Program

Since the World Radio Conference of 2012 (WRC-12), radio spectrum for mobile broadband has been in the limelight whilst the spectrum needs of other widespread and already existing services, and in particular broadcasting, has received little or no attention. Moreover, there has been speculation in the media of the future potential of an extended digital dividend in the 700 MHz band in Europe, although this was not the conclusion of the Conference.

The actual conclusion at WRC-12 was to pave the way for a decision on “co-primary” status for broadcasting and mobile broadband in ITU Region 1 (Europe, Africa, Middle East and parts of Russia) pending technical studies to be completed before the next World Radio Conference of 2015. Broadcast Networks Europe (BNE) and its members are aware of the desire by African and Middle East Countries to deploy wireless broadband services into the 700 MHz band against the background that the 800 MHz band is blocked by other services, and can be used neither for broadcast services nor for mobile broadband. BNE feels it necessary to highlight that after 2015 the Middle East, African and European sub-regions will be able to decide independently the role of the 700 MHz band in the provision of broadcasting, mobile broadband or possibly even other services.

Over the last decade the European broadcast industry and European consumers have invested heavily in the switch-over from analogue television to the highly successful Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) service. As a result it has been possible to make the 800 MHz band available for high capacity mobile broadband services throughout Europe when the analogue to digital switch-over will be completed by 2013.

After switch-over, tens of billions of Euros will have been invested in DTT by the broadcast industry and by European consumers. DTT in Europe currently delivers around 1500 TV-channels and serves an average of about 50% of European households. In many EU Member States, DTT is the prevailing TV delivery platform reaching over 80% of households in a number of major countries. About 275 million Europeans are watching TV over DTT - each and everyone with an average daily consumption of linear television between 2 and 4 hours. These services, which consumers have come to depend on, are delivered using the UHF radio spectrum, including the 700 MHz band. This band is crucial not only to the sustained delivery of audio-visual content to European consumers but also to any future platform developments e.g. High Definition, 3D TV, etc.

BNE and several of its members actively participated in the WRC-12 process to ensure that the needs of the European broadcast industry and ultimately consumers’ interests were suitably represented in the process of developing the WRC-12 agreement and the subsequent decisions on the studies to be concluded ahead of the next World Radio Conference of 2015. BNE will continue to actively participate in the work streams that result from the WRC decisions.

WRC has committed to co-primary status of 700 MHz spectrum for both Broadcasting and Wireless Broadband services but not to a European decision on the future use of this spectrum

The final position adopted by the 2012 World Radio Conference was for preparatory work to be undertaken ahead of the 2015 World Radio Conference to define the appropriate band plan, protection arrangements and technical operating conditions for mobile broadband (IMT)¹ services to be authorized for co-primary status alongside with broadcast services in the 700 MHz spectrum band in Region 1. This decision does not pre-judge the deployment of IMT services in this spectrum after 2015 for Region 1 countries and does not imply that the 700 MHz band will be the source of more spectrum to mobile broadband.

It is important to acknowledge that the European Union has recently adopted a strategic framework, the Radio Spectrum Policy Program (RSPP), within which it will holistically assess the relative merits of specific service deployment, both current and future, in the spectrum range 400 MHz – 6 GHz taking account of the legitimate expectations of existing industry operators, the competitive landscape and the consumers' expectations. This is where BNE has been and will continue to work proactively with European policy makers and national regulators to secure a balanced debate and a balanced outcome.

Europe can reap the full benefits of the 800 MHz band - the case for more UHF spectrum for Wireless Broadband is unproven

A lot has been made of the impending mobile broadband data explosion and the need for more spectrum to support this expansion in demand. Europe can reap the full benefits of the 800 MHz and 900 MHz spectrum bands to provide mobile broadband services to rural areas whilst the spectrum bands above 1 GHz are ideally suited to the provision of high capacity services in more densely populated areas.

The significant penetration of multi-technology devices using technologies such as Wi-Fi or Cognitive Radio as alternatives to IMT systems, and the availability of shared and collective use of spectrum, will further shape the real future need of truly mobile IMT services and spectrum. In addition, previous economic assessments have also suggested that the economic case for additional re-farming of spectrum below 800 MHz is unproven.

BNE has worked closely with European policy makers over the last two years to inject a view from the broadcast sector into the debate on the importance of radio spectrum for broadcast purposes. The final text of the RSPP establishes, among other things, the need for an inventory of radio spectrum use, an assessment of forthcoming technologies and the future spectrum demand by different services. The text of the RSPP does not constrain future policy decisions with regard to terrestrial broadcast services but rather aims to optimize the use of radio spectrum in Europe beyond 2015.

Consumer Commitment to DTT

The consumers have embraced DTT at an unprecedented rate across Europe, recognizing the enhanced choice and diversity of content made possible through the efficiency of Digital Terrestrial Television

¹ International Mobile Telecommunications - IMT

transmission. This widespread adoption of DTT by the consumers needs to be a key policy consideration in any debate associated with further re-farming of radio spectrum below 1 GHz, beyond that of the 800 MHz band currently underway.

If the DTT platform and its ability to deliver audiovisual content was to be compromised in any way by further claims for alternative uses of the UHF spectrum below the 800 MHz band, this would likely have considerable detrimental effects to consumer and industry investments, platform competition, choice, social inclusion, and the local content creation sector that depends so heavily on the terrestrial platform across Europe for its funding.

Expansion of the sub 1 GHz band in Europe used for Wireless Broadband will cause enhanced disruption to current and planned Broadcast services

Both the broadcast industry and the consumers have invested heavily to enable the release of the 800 MHz Digital Dividend spectrum. Whilst a lot of effort has been made by National Regulators to minimize DTT service disruption when LTE services are launched, it is recognized that disruption will occur, and existing DTT households will suffer levels of interference that will compromise the current high level of Quality of Service available from the DTT platform. Any displacement of broadcast services below the 800 MHz band is likely to further compromise consumer reception of broadcast services and lead to greater service disruption and subsequent platform churn, ultimately harming platform competition. This effect would be further exacerbated if it hindered the current DTT services from evolving to High Definition and 3D TV.

In summary

The radio spectrum currently available for Broadcasting below 1 GHz in Europe is heavily deployed to serve consumers with a wide and diverse range of European originated audiovisual content. To ensure continued service provision it is important that policy makers consider a balanced approach to radio spectrum use in Europe, with the RSPP providing the backdrop for this. The RSPP process will have to strike a delicate balance between not only technical and financial aspects but also between political, social, cultural, legal and similar, less tangible, but equally important aspects. In acknowledgement of the importance of terrestrial broadcasting to European citizens BNE considers it important to clarify that there has been no commitment to a European decision to use 700 MHz band for mobile broadband as an outcome of WRC-12.

About Broadcast Networks Europe (BNE)

Broadcast Networks Europe (BNE) represents Terrestrial Broadcast Network Operators with operations in 25 European countries. BNE is dedicated to maintaining an efficient and fair operational environment for the Terrestrial Broadcast Network Operators with a view to ensuring that European citizens continue to receive universal access to a broad range of TV and radio programmes as well as other related over-the-air services.