

Secretary of State Oliver Dowden: It's time to level up Britain's screens

Think of the last TV show you recommended to a friend. In my house, we're hooked on *Spiral*, the French police procedural. In the office, all the talk is about *Mare of Easttown*.

Whatever your choice, I'll bet you didn't switch on your TV and watch it live, alongside millions of others. When *Line of Duty* drew record-breaking live viewing figures earlier this year, it was a rare exception to the new broadcasting rule. Traditional viewing habits are dead. We now live in a world of smart TVs and streaming sticks, catch-up and on-demand; of that nightly dilemma between Netflix, BBC iPlayer, or Amazon Prime.

It's a golden age for TV – and I want to keep it that way. But to do that, we need the healthiest broadcasting landscape: one that is diverse, free and pluralistic. One where streamers can keep churning out brilliant shows, while traditional public service broadcasters retain their place at the centre of the UK's media ecosystem.

Right now, UK broadcasters are holding their own. Production studios are packed. The BBC and Channel 4 have put out two of the most critically-acclaimed shows of recent years, *I May Destroy You* and *It's A Sin*.

But our broadcasters can't do it alone – and they certainly can't compete in a digital world while operating under analogue rules.

So in the Autumn, I plan to bring forward a White Paper on the future of broadcasting, and how we can make it fit for the 21st century.

First, we need to level the playing field, and address one blatant disparity forcing traditional broadcasters to compete with one hand tied behind their backs. Every "linear" broadcaster – BBC, Sky, etc. – has to comply with stringent content and audience protection standards.

You might assume the same is true of video-on-demand services like Amazon Prime and Disney+. You'd be wrong. Of course, some have done an admirable job of introducing their own procedures – such as Netflix's voluntary age ratings partnership with the BBFC. But this is all on an ad-hoc and inconsistent basis.

So this summer we will consult on whether it's time to set the same basic rules for video-on-demand services as we do for traditional broadcasters.

The White Paper will also set out proposals on how we make sure public service broadcasters are given sufficient visibility – aka "prominence" – on different online platforms, and ensure viewers can continue to find and access original and high-quality British content.

Amidst all this TV upheaval, it's time to consider the long-term future of

one broadcaster in particular: Channel 4. When Channel 4 joined the airwaves in 1982, there were just three other terrestrial TV stations, and there was a lively debate about how to put the latest available set of bandwidths to best use. The main reason Channel 4 won that competition and was set up as a publicly-owned, commercially-run station was to provide greater choice.

Four decades later, choice is no longer an issue. Commercial satellite and digital terrestrial TV had already pushed channel numbers into the hundreds before the big online streamers exploded onto our screens.

Channel 4 has delivered on its remit since being established, and has done an excellent job in managing the recent market upheaval.

But this is 2021, not 1982 – and the broadcasting landscape has changed beyond all recognition.

I want to make sure Channel 4 thrives for another 40 years, and so I believe it's time to seriously consider changes to its current public ownership model. That model severely restricts Channel 4's ability to access capital and compete with commercial broadcasters by investing in technology and programming.

In order to secure its long-term success, this summer I will consult on the sale of Channel 4 – and I will be proceeding on the basis that an alternative ownership model (but one where it keeps its public service remit) may be better for the broadcaster, and better for the country. Private investment would mean more content, more jobs – and a more sustainable future for Channel 4.

In an era of fake news and huge technological change, we need trusted and respected media providers more than ever. We're taking steps to make sure they keep their place at the heart of British broadcasting, whatever the future holds.