

The government's plans for local TV puts too much of an onus on these stations to provide content for the national networks. Local TV should focus on local issues.

The government's Framework for local TV aims to support local stations by buying their content to syndicate nationally. But, in the second of three articles, [Sally Broughton-Micova](#), finds that a lack of local material and the relatively small amounts of money that are involved means that the government's plans for commercially self-sustaining local TV stations are not realistic.



Giving people access to local news and providing fora for local discourse is good for democracy. It is encouraging that the Government recognises the important role local media can play and are willing to invest in it, but current [plans for local TV](#) risk setting local media up to fail. One reason is that its expectations and the ensuing obligations it intends to put on local TV are too great. [my first blog](#) of this series pointed out that local TV stations in the UK are not going to be supported by the kind of large networks that provide the vast majority of content to local stations in the US. This post points out the danger of expecting too much from standalone commercial local TV stations.

Culture Minister Jeremy Hunt held a "summit" on local TV in Birmingham on 18 August with interested parties and promoting his vision. Of the [65 locations](#) that are being suggested for local TV, Birmingham is probably the most likely to be able to support a commercially viable local TV with its population of over 2 million and relatively dynamic business sector. Whether it would match Hunt's vision is not clear.

High quality content needs money and material

According to its Framework for local TV, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport expects "that local services will offer a range of valued and diverse programming" and that they will reflect cultural interests and tradition as well as promote volunteering and participation. The framework uses the BBC mantra stating that these stations should "inform, educate and entertain" and suggests that the licenses will contain minimum content requirements. However the plan is based on the idea that these local TV stations will be self-sustainable commercial entities and not local versions of the BBC or community run voluntary projects.

Despite the fact that new technology makes the technical side of production much cheaper, it still costs a lot of money to produce or procure diverse quality content for television. Although Ofcom research has shown that people are overwhelmingly interested in local news, weather and sports, it is unlikely that local stations will be able to compete with the large national stations for audience share and advertisers when it comes to entertainment, drama and most other content. They would also be entering this competition in a time when advertising budgets are increasingly being spent online. Hunt's suggestion during the [local TV summit](#) that Google's success with localised advertising is because of a lack of local TV and therefore represents an opportunity is a dangerously misguided interpretation of the trend towards targeted online advertising. It will be very difficult for local TV to attract sufficient advertising income to support quality content in a variety of genres.

One of the ways the Government's plan intends to provide financial support to local TV is by having the BBC spend up to £5 million annually for 3 years to buy content from local stations. At the local TV summit Hunt also suggested that local TV will be selling content to other national stations. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, £5 million divided among several stations will amount to very little in relation to the budgets required to make high quality content. Secondly, local stations will have to produce content that national stations will want to buy. Consider the [plea](#) from Shameless' Paul Abbott for British producers and commissioners to try making television drama at a cheaper cost of only £500,000 per episode. Or, that national stations in the UK are currently spending their budgets procuring high quality production from independent producers and hit series from the US.

Producing quality content requires more than just money. It also requires material. It is one thing to find enough stories to fill a local news broadcast and another to find material for lifestyle and entertainment programmes or sports programmes and live events. Birmingham might be one of the most culturally vibrant cities in the UK, but among 2 million people there are only so many stars or interesting guest to appear on talk shows, and performances to broadcast. Doing research with national broadcasters in countries with similar populations, I found stations struggling for material, having done documentaries on every little village

and recycling the same musicians and local celebrities on talk shows.

Local sports might offer the best potential for attractive content, but local TV is not going to have the rights to the most high profile events. Through the Premier league, the Championship, the Carling cup and others, the broadcast rights for Birmingham's two major sports teams, for instance, are already taken by Sky Sports and BBC. Most other local material, whether sports or cultural, are not likely to draw large audiences or be interesting enough for national stations to acquire.

Local TV should focus on the local

It is not realistic that local TV be expected, much less obliged to do everything that national generalist channels are doing. They will not be able to achieve the level of diversity and quality required to attract viewers and advertisers, especially in terms of entertainment and drama. It is more realistic and more in line what people have said they want for local TV to focus on local news, community information, and creating programmes designed for dialogue on local issues. Local news can not only engage people in local politics but also provide coverage of cultural and sports events.

However, this kind of a focus does not generate content worth acquiring by national channels. It would mean that the idea that local TV can be partly funded by selling content to national stations would have to be scrapped. This kind of focus also does not fill a 24 hour programme and perhaps not even 12 hours per day of continuous broadcast, without which presence in the digital terrestrial network (DTT) and broadcast through Freeview might not make sense. The next post in this series will examine the practicality of the Government's plan for launching local TV on DTT.

This article first appeared on the [LSE Media Policy Blog on 19 August](#).