The Media

Worksheet 3.2:

The Digital Switch-Over

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow

The challenges facing television news after digital switch-over

The way news is made and used is changing at an unprecedented pace. One of the significant drivers of that change is digital switch-over (DSO), although this is happening alongside other technological and commercial developments affecting all forms of news media.

For the last 50 years the UK's public service broadcasting (PSB) tradition has ensured high quality news provision on both the BBC and independent television channels. It has been a clear policy objective of both government and broadcasting regulators to maintain and support plurality in the supply of high quality PSB news. In an era of limited TV sources, there was an assumption that this simple plurality would help avoid a one-dimensional perspective on the news, and encourage diversity and breadth of appeal. However, digital broadcasting raises issues about the nature and purpose of plurality in UK national and international news, and the future requirements for impartiality in TV news. LINE 10

The amount and variety of news available to UK consumers has never been greater. Alongside news on the five main PSB channels, there are two home-based 24-hour news channels, a range of international and niche channels carrying news, an ever-growing number of internet sources, plus thousands of newspapers and radio stations. The developing digital age has therefore seen an enormous proliferation in the volume and range of news suppliers, making new voices and perspectives available as never before.

It is striking though that traditional PSB television, BBC and ITN news, remain overwhelmingly the main source of news for most people. While the other traditional sources (newspapers and radio) have declined in importance to people, the value viewers place on television news is virtually unchanged. Though there has been a gradual decline in audiences for bulletins on the main channels over the last decade, other sectors of the news industry have seen more significant declines. The five-year decline in newspaper circulations – particularly tabloids – is far greater than any decline in television news viewing. LINE 20

In future, there will be ever more outlets for audio-visual news, including through the internet, with its almost limitless capacity for information, analysis and opinion. For some users, the internet is already becoming an important additional source of news and there are also opportunities to access relatively newly available TV channels, ranging from Fox News to Al Jazeera. The availability of such a huge range of traditional and new sources of news opens up possibilities for real diversity of opinion to be heard. LINE 30

The development of the internet, cheaper newsgathering, and the expansion of video news agencies all offer potential for new news providers to offer services at less cost than at present. Images and information are now easily exchanged between news-gatherers, turning news stories into international commodities. Commercial considerations are likely to increase temptations on broadcasters to rely on 'bought-in' material, with some forms of original in-depth journalism within news output a potential casualty.

At present, there is a legal requirement that all UK-licensed television and radio news is duly impartial, and there remains broad public support for the notion. Viewers say they still *want* television news to be impartial, even though research shows they are less convinced of its *actual* impartiality than previously. In fact, people have decreasing faith in the credibility of any news source LINE 40

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although the greatest levels of trust appear to be in television. The traditional PSB channels are seen as more credible than other commercial broadcasters, and trust in the BBC is greater than for any other source.

However, it is possible that rules on impartiality may actually stifle the expression of a genuine diversity of views. Rules on impartiality affect the way stories are told, and may have some influence on the selection of stories in the first place. This may have fostered a middle-of-the-road culture in mainstream news, as news broadcasters may feel compelled to offer a traditional 'both-sides-of-the-argument' approach, to the exclusion of more diverse voices. Views that do not fit easily within a conventional two-sided debate can struggle to be heard. In time-constrained news bulletins, the temptation is to focus only on established viewpoints, and stifle the expression of views that are not part of the established mainstream, such as those of the young, of some ethnic minorities, and others. LINE 50

Content analysis reveals there are far more similarities than differences in agendas on mainstream television news. Generally, it is not common for different UK channels to lead on different stories – and even rarer for a channel to lead on a story not also covered on all the other channels too. Programmes on different channels often vary more in style than in substance. The traditional interpretation of 'plurality' – based on a limited number of TV channels – may not at present be delivering a really diverse range of views.

There is no doubt that multiple alternative viewpoints are available 'out there' – even though many are hard to find – but, in general, news outlets of all kinds often tell the same stories, from the same perspective, using much the same material. LINE 60

Active news consumers are employing more and more internet resources and overseas channels to find out about things that interest them, although they tend to use them in addition to traditional sources of news – especially television – rather than instead of them. The trend might be characterized as 'news promiscuity', i.e. television provides the core relationship for these news users but they are increasingly tempted to dabble with other sources too.

Future developments may make web-based 'television' more accessible. Certainly the web offers the *potential* for almost limitless diversity in news, discussion and debate. 'Citizen journalism' and other interactive exchanges also present interesting possibilities, and new forms of information exchange include the growth of blogging and of self-posted video on the internet. Figures suggest more than a one-hundred-fold increase in blogs over the last three years – although this growth comes from a very low base. LINE 70

However, genuine alternatives to well-funded TV news are not always easy to find and there are now many more channels to watch that do not carry any news at all. There are suggestions that many so-called 'new' sources of news are not really new at all, but instead offer multiple ways to access content already available elsewhere.

In future, the role of linear TV news (scheduled TV news offered at particular times) may be reduced, and websites in particular will increasingly offer video news content from different regulatory backgrounds. Both regulated and unregulated news is likely to be accessed through the same device. It may be harder to apply traditional impartiality rules in such an environment, where users are less aware of the core source of the news they are watching, and in such an environment, impartial sources of news will almost certainly come to be less distinguishable in the minds of audiences than now. LINE 80

Adapted from: *New News, Future News: the challenges for television news after Digital Switch-over*, Ofcom 2007

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Questions

1. Identify and explain three potential consequences for television news of the switchover to digital television.

2. Identify and explain the reasons why current rules on impartiality in public service broadcast television news 'may actually stifle the expression of a genuine diversity of views' (ll. 44-45).

3. Suggest reasons why in the future 'impartial sources of news will almost certainly come to be less distinguishable in the minds of audiences than now' (ll. 82-83).

4. What evidence is there in the text that future developments may lead to a growing diversity of sources and types of news?

5. Explain what is meant by 'citizen journalism' (l. 68) and suggest two advantages and two disadvantages of it.

6. Identify and explain evidence in the text that supports the view that the news is a socially constructed product.

7. What evidence is there in the text to support: a) pluralist views; and b) Marxist views of the mass media?