



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

10th, January 2007

Dear Mark,

Following our discussion at the Public Accounts Committee yesterday, I thought it might be useful to underline the main point I wished to make.

It can be argued that I-Player has not been the best piece of procurement done by the BBC that it lacks such obvious features as indicators of download file size- useful to the consumer on limited broadband or true high quality encoding differentiating it from other currently available, off the peg applications.

I do recognise that that it has an attractive interface, is user friendly and addresses digital rights issues so I stop short of suggesting the BBC has bought a lemon.

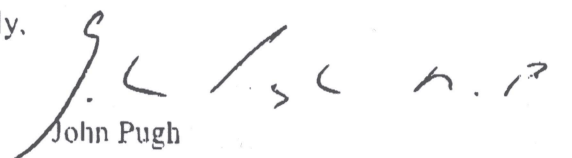
The more fundamental issue is its failure to apply open standards and be sufficiently interoperable to work fully (stream and download) on more than one platform. The BBC is funded by licence players not all of whom have or chose to use a computer running Windows XP or Vista. By guaranteeing full functionality to the products of one software vendor it is as a public body handing a commercial advantage to that company- effectively illegal state aid! The aspiration to eventually ( you said within two years) remove this advantage- does not rebut this charge. A promise of amendment is never sufficient excuse for past sins or indeed much of an explanation.

Most major web based developments of any scale these days work on the presumption that interoperability, open standards and platform neutrality are givens. It is not clear why the BBC design brief did not specify these requirements or if it did what technical problems- given the expertise available- hinder them being implemented.

So long as the I-Player is bundled in with Windows/Internet Explorer it continues runs the risk of breaching state aid rules - as the benefits it thereby bestows on Microsoft (with their somewhat blemished reputation for fair competition) come via the deployment of the public's licence money. What might be a pragmatic choice for a privately funded company becomes deeply problematic for a public corporation.

I recognise and welcome the assurances that the BBC and you personally have given on this subject but wonder whether the sheer novelty of the new media has blinded many to the clear commercial inequity in the delivery of it.

Yours Sincerely,

  
John Pugh