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Dr Rob Watson
robwatson@decentered.co.uk
<https://decentered.co.uk>
+447817720688

The Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
100 Parliament Street
London
SW1A 2BQ
United Kingdom

Dear Secretary of State,

Your continuation as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport provides an opportunity to sustain the work already under way and give greater direction to the Government's media policy.

Continuity, however, is not sufficient in itself. After two years in office, there is now a need for a more active, assertive and ambitious approach. Britain's media system requires structural reform, not simply the continued management of established institutions and inherited policy assumptions.

A central concern is the weakening of the middle layer of the UK's media ecology. Between the large national broadcasters and publishers on one side, and the global technology platforms on the other, there should be a diverse and sustainable network of local, independent, cooperative, civic and community media providers.

That middle layer has instead been allowed to deteriorate.

This has consequences beyond the closure of individual newspapers, radio stations or reporting services. When communities lose the means to describe themselves, examine local decisions and represent their own experiences, they also lose part of the civic infrastructure that supports accountability, place-based identity and social cohesion.

Local, independent and community media should therefore be recognised as more than a marginal addition to the established media system. These organisations provide opportunities for citizens to report on their communities, develop practical media literacies, scrutinise public institutions and take part directly in civic life.

The Government needs to do a better job of building the capacity and alliances required to support this work.

Your department should establish a formal alliance of alternative media providers, including community radio stations, independent local publishers, cooperative news organisations, civic media networks, specialist publications, independent producers and participatory digital platforms.

This should not be another short-term advisory group in which smaller organisations are invited to endorse proposals largely determined by incumbent institutions. It should have a substantive role in shaping policy on funding, regulation, public-interest commissioning, media literacy, local accountability, digital distribution and public service media.

The model could reflect the principles of the Civic Compact by recognising that citizens and civil society organisations must be given the means to represent themselves. Similar principles are being applied through devolution, local government reform and place-based growth agendas, including the approach associated with Andy Burnham's administration in Greater Manchester.

However, political and economic devolution without communicative devolution will remain incomplete. More powerful mayors, combined authorities and local institutions do not automatically produce a stronger citizen voice. Devolved government also requires devolved and independent systems of communication through which decisions can be questioned and local priorities debated.

This work will require you to challenge incumbent media organisations more directly.

The BBC, major commercial broadcasters and established publishers have important roles, but their historical position should not give them an automatic entitlement to dominate policy discussions, funding settlements or distribution arrangements. Too often, established providers use their access, scale and institutional authority to resist reforms that might diversify provision or support alternative organisations.

Institutional longevity should not be mistaken for continuing public value.

The BBC Charter Renewal process provides an opportunity to examine whether the Corporation is meeting the needs of UK citizens, rather than treating people primarily as audiences, consumers or licence-fee payers.

The BBC should be required to demonstrate how it supports media plurality, independent local production, community participation and civic communication beyond its own institutional boundaries. This might include shared facilities, local commissioning, training partnerships, ac-

cess to archives, technical support and meaningful collaboration with community and civic media providers.

The purpose would not be to weaken the BBC, but to ensure that the benefits associated with public service media are distributed more widely.

Ofcom's structure and remit should also be reconsidered. The regulator now carries responsibility for broadcasting, telecommunications, spectrum, postal services, on-demand platforms and significant areas of online safety. These are extensive and distinct fields, each requiring specialist expertise, clear statutory objectives and visible accountability.

There is a serious case for breaking up Ofcom or establishing substantially more autonomous regulatory bodies for its principal areas of responsibility. Broadcasting and civic media should not be treated merely as another component of an increasingly large communications market.

A dedicated media regulator could give greater attention to plurality, local provision, participation, editorial accountability and public-interest communication. Structural reform should be considered on its merits rather than dismissed because the existing institutional settlement is administratively convenient.

There is also the question of your department's presence on X.

You and DCMS should remain active on the platform. X can be confrontational, unpleasant and difficult, but it remains a space in which journalists, campaigners, policy specialists, political representatives and members of the public seek to question government.

A minister responsible for media and communications should not withdraw from difficult public exchanges in favour of perceived safer waters elsewhere. Leaving the platform risks appearing less like a principled stand and more like an unwillingness to meet criticism directly.

Remaining present does not require responding to every insult or manufactured dispute. It means answering substantive questions, correcting inaccuracies, publishing evidence and demonstrating confidence in open and sometimes uncomfortable democratic discussion.

The first two years have produced consultations, announcements and broad statements of intent, but they have not materially improved the position of local, independent, community and civic media.

The middle of the media system remains weak. Local accountability continues to decline. Community media remains poorly supported. Public policy is still shaped disproportionately by in-

cumbent organisations. Ofcom's responsibilities continue to expand, while the BBC's relationship with citizens remains insufficiently reciprocal.

Two years have been wasted, and there is now much to catch up on.

Your continuation at DCMS provides an opportunity to change course. The Government should develop a serious alliance for media reform that combines public service principles with local participation, institutional scrutiny, devolved communication and the right of citizens to represent themselves.

The real work must now begin.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Watson'. The signature is stylized with a large 'R' and a cursive 'Watson'.

Dr Rob Watson

Decentered Media

On Behalf of Better Media

<https://bettermedia.uk/>