Ukrainian invasion

In response to the horrific invasion of Ukraine and in support of those affected, the UK's largest mobile operators, Virgin Media o2, Three, Vodafone and EE quickly pledged to remove charges for data use in Ukraine and credit charges for calls and texts to and from Ukraine and the UK.

The unprecedented announcement is echoed to a large extent by telecoms providers all over Europe.

Virgin Media o2 are offering these measures, for example:

- These measures apply to customers on O2 Pay Monthly, O2 Pay as you Go, Virgin Mobile, Virgin Media O2 Business customers, Virgin Media home phone customers, and giffgaff customers
- Texts and data use, and all calls to and from the Ukraine, will be covered
- This will cover the period 21 Feb until 31 March 2022, but we will keep this under review
- Charges will be credited back to customers automatically – they do not need to do anything. We will be texting customers to confirm what is happening.

The reaction to the news continues to be felt industry-wide. Ofcom has revoked Russia Today's licence to broadcast in the UK, with immediate effect, along with other territories in Western Europe which are no longer broadcasting RT content. Ofcom were bullish, saying that the news came "amid 29 ongoing investigations by Ofcom into the due impartiality of RT's news and current affairs coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We consider the volume and potentially serious nature of the issues raised within such a short period to be of great concern – especially given RT's compliance history, which has seen the channel fined £200,000 for previous impartiality breaches."

Ofcom Chief Executive Dame Melanie Dawes said, "Freedom of expression is something we guard fiercely in this country, and the bar for action on broadcasters is rightly set very high. Following an independent regulatory process, we have today found that RT is not fit and proper to hold a licence in the UK. As a result we have revoked RT's UK broadcasting licence."

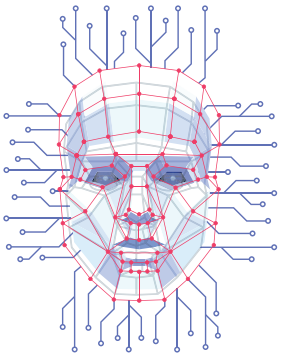
Ofcom's move is just one of up to 1000 sanctions on Russian individuals and businesses by the UK alone, a growing list intended to cripple the Russian Federation economically. At the time of writing sanctions have just been targeted at RT's Managing Director Alexey Nikolov, Anton Anisimov, editor-in-chief at Sputnik, as well as Sergey Brilev, news anchor at Rossiya Television and Radio Network.

Deepfake technology

Weaponised tech is also featuring in this war like no other before it. On March 2 a passable deepfake video of a rather wooden President Zelensky was uploaded to a hacked Ukrainian news website, calling on his soldiers to lay down their arms.

This spread to social media immediately but was quickly debunked by Zelensky himself. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and its parent company Meta immediately responded and removed the content from its platforms.

A reminder just how easily technology can be harnessed to spread damaging misinformation, and that deepfake technology is in its infancy. As this technology improves and is adopted more widely, the opportunity for deepfakes to subvert world events and narratives in future is worrying and enormous.

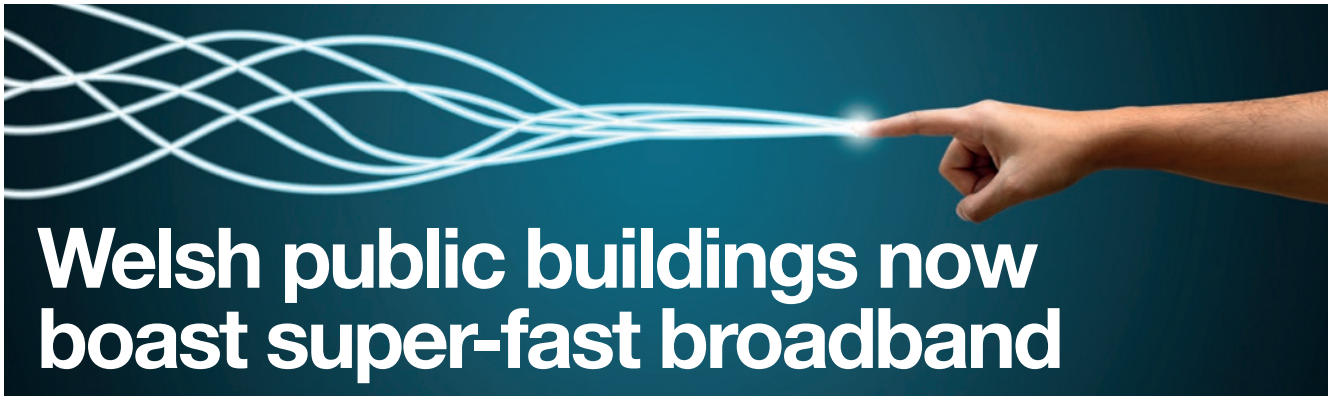


Hacking and hacktivists

Hacking on both sides of the conflict, from government agencies and individuals collaborating online is also having a significant impact; it is both subverting information or alerting viewers to the propaganda they are subjected to. Three Russian TV networks have experienced live hacks as well as a local OTT platform in recent weeks.

On February 26, two days after the invasion began, and two days after announcing its intentions on Twitter, international hacktivist collective Anonymous brought Russian state-controlled television channels simultaneously to a standstill, showing audiences footage, albeit briefly, of what was actually happening on the ground in Ukraine.

At the same time the group, while operating independently of governments, also claimed to have hacked all Kremlin news media websites on the same day and continue to aggressively target hostile forces through its network of hackers worldwide.



Welsh public buildings now boast super-fast broadband

More than 600 hospitals, police stations, libraries and other public buildings in Wales have been connected to lightning-fast full fibre broadband under a UK Government drive to level up public services and speed up rollout.

It marks the completion of the largest public sector broadband project in Wales delivered funded by the UK government as part of its 'levelling-up' strategy across the whole of the UK - making a tangible difference to communities across Wales.

Vital local services including leisure centres, tourist destinations and youth centres across North Wales, South East Wales, Pembrokeshire and other areas can now access internet speeds at least ten times faster than their old mostly copper-based connections thanks to a £11.5 million UK Government investment. All 620 buildings now have improved and ultra-reliable connectivity to help improve the productivity and user experience of the public services they offer and, as their requirements increase in the future, they will be able to tap into speeds of more than a gigabit (1,000 megabits) per second.

It means doctors and police officers can save time waiting for large files such as x-rays and CCTV footage to download, care home residents will get better access to online therapy and entertainment, and library users will enjoy faster Wi-Fi for surfing the web.

The government hopes that these connections will also incentivise commercial broadband providers to deliver upgrades to surrounding homes and businesses in Wales by allowing them to extend the government-funded gigabit network, which is cheaper and quicker than having to build it from scratch.

HbbTV announces Conformance Test Suite v2022-1

The HbbTV Association, a global initiative dedicated to providing open standards for the delivery of advanced interactive TV services through broadcast and broadband networks for connected TV sets and set-top boxes, is pleased to announce the release of a new version of the HbbTV Conformance Test Suite.

The new version is called v2022-1; it is the first major release of the Test Suite in 2022. The release contains 3,002 test cases in total, and includes an increase of 101 approved test cases since the v2021-3 release.

Many of the tests, which were approved for the first time, are to increase test coverage for the Low Latency streaming and Targeted Advertising features, in addition to improving the quality of tests across many areas of the core HbbTV specification.

"The release of the new HbbTV Compliance Test Suite version, offering enhanced and increased verification possibilities, perfectly illustrates the constant adjustment of the HbbTV specifications to market requirements," said Vincent Grivet, Chair of the HbbTV Association. "The extended Test Suite ensures that existing and new features, enriching viewers' TV experience, quickly and smoothly reach HbbTV-compliant TV sets and set-top boxes."

The HbbTV Conformance Test Suite is an important tool for device manufacturers to verify compliance of their products with the most current HbbTV specifications and their new features. The Test Suite is available through one of the registered HbbTV test centres and, as a convenience, to HbbTV members for use in their own facilities.

Yorkshire trials water pipes in innovative fibre roll out solution

Fast broadband will run through water pipes in parts of South Yorkshire as part of plans to get better internet access to people more quickly.

New proposals to accelerate the rollout of broadband without digging up roads would see fibre-optic cables deployed through 17 kilometres of pre-existing, established water mains between Barnsley and Penistone in the government technology trial. Broadband companies could then tap into the network to deliver gigabit-capable connections to an estimated 8,500 homes and businesses along the route, helping to access hard-to-reach communities.

Civil works, in particular installing new ducts and poles, can make up as much as four fifths of the costs to industry of building new gigabit-capable broadband networks. The Fibre in Water scheme will demonstrate what could be a greener, quicker and more cost-effective way of connecting fibre optic cables to homes, businesses and mobile masts, without the disruption caused by digging up roads and land.

The network will also be used to set up 5G masts to bring fast and reliable wireless broadband to hard-to-reach communities where wired solutions are too expensive to deliver commercially.

The first trial of its kind in the UK, it will also explore how fibre can help the water industry detect leaks, operate more efficiently and lower the carbon cost of drinking water.

The trials will last for up to two years and, if successful, the technology could be operational in networks from 2024 onwards.

Digital Infrastructure Minister Julia Lopez said, "Digging up roads and land is one of the biggest obstacles to rolling out faster broadband, so we're exploring how we can make use of the existing water network to accelerate deployment and help detect and minimise water leaks. We're committed to getting homes and businesses across the country connected to better broadband and this cutting-edge project is an exciting example of the bold measures this government is leading on to level up communities with the very best digital connectivity."

If successful, the project could be replicated in other parts of the country and could turbocharge the government's £5 billion Project Gigabit - the biggest broadband roll out in British history funding top-of-the-range gigabit connections for millions of rural homes and businesses that would otherwise be left out of commercial deployment due to the higher costs of connection. Yorkshire and Lincolnshire have more than 300,000 rural homes and businesses in line for an upgrade, including 56,800 premises in South Yorkshire.

Gigabit-capable broadband coverage has rocketed in the UK from less than 6 per cent in 2019 to more than 66 per cent following government measures to stimulate commercial investment from broadband companies and bust barriers to roll out. In the UK 20 per cent of water put into public supply is wasted due to leaks every day. With current technology, it can be difficult for water companies to quickly identify the exact location of a leak and carry out a repair.

This project, delivered by Yorkshire Water working with Arcadis and University of Strathclyde will test solutions that reduce water leaks by putting fibre sensors in the pipes which allow water companies to improve the speed and accuracy with which they can identify a leak and repair it, often before it causes a problem for consumers. Water companies have committed to delivering a 50% reduction in leakage, and this project could help to reach that goal.

The technology being deployed during the trials has been approved by the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI). The DWI requires rigorous testing ahead of approving any products and the processes that introduce them into drinking water pipes, and fibre has already been deployed in water pipes in other countries such as Spain.

Sam Bright, Innovation Programme Manager at Yorkshire Water said, "We are very pleased that the Government is supporting the development of the Fibre in Water solution which can reduce the environmental impact and day-to-day disruptions that can be caused by both water and telecoms companies' activities. The technology for fibre in water has significantly progressed in recent years and this project will now enable us to fully develop its potential to help improve access to better broadband in hard-to-reach areas and further reduce leakage on our networks."