

***RESPONSE BY ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR ENGLAND
(ACE) TO OFCOM'S SECOND PSB REVIEW – JUNE, 2008***

* This review was co-ordinated by ACE members Alan Wright and Anne Scorer, with input from Chair and fellow members.

* As well as views expressed in meetings, members contributed by email and phone discussion.

* Thanks are due to Graham Howell for his valued assistance, and to his colleagues Kate Stross and Katy Boulton who met with AW at Riverside House to discuss latest thinking on PSB.

Our response themes have been guided (though not exclusively) by the Consultation Questions on page 15 of the PSB review published 10.4.08.

A key target is the identification of themes which have particular resonance with citizens and consumers in England and its regions and localities.

We recognise the aims of PSB as –

1. Inform about the world
2. Reflect and strengthen cultural identity
3. Stimulate interest in art, science, history and other topics
4. Promote awareness of difference cultures and alternative viewpoints

How well are the public service broadcasters delivering public purposes?

- I. Do you agree with Ofcom's assessment that television continues to have an essential role in delivering the purposes of PSB?*
- II. Do you agree that UK originated output is fundamental to the delivery of PSB purposes?*

We agree that television should continue to have a key role here. A key theme is the split between regional and local needs. We believe that most people have the greatest appetite for news and current affairs relevant to their locality – often just extending a few miles around home – with less identification with wider regional themes.

It is interesting that, at the time of compiling this response, the BBC Trust report has missed a major point here. It accepted that London based broadcasting did not meet the needs of viewers and listeners in the Nations, but forgot completely that regions and localities in England are similarly blighted.

We would emphasise the local here as this is very different to the Nations perspective. England's consumers like local not regional news and current affairs.

The continued existence of flourishing local newspapers, despite many challenges and competition, is evidence of this.

Home-grown broadcasting (nationally, regionally and locally) is an essential part of this – both to give an identity which viewers can feel a harmony with, and to give a living reflection of regions within England to the rest of the UK.

However we note that UK originated output is diminishing in quality and value as per the definition of PSB, eg there are fewer and fewer programmes promoting awareness of the world and other cultures, or music, arts and sciences – and often those that are produced are scheduled in late-night slots when some sections of the audience, particularly the elderly, are less likely

to be able to enjoy them (eg South Bank Show). We welcome initiatives eg. BBC IPlayer to enable subsequent access to programmes, but it will take time for all viewers to have such access. In the meantime we would encourage broadcasters to repeat PSB programmes during the day instead of the usual 'daytime telly' fare.

The Changing Market Environment

Do you agree with Ofcom's conclusions about the way that other digital channels and interactive media contribute to public purposes?

We accept that there are many positives in the huge range of output available from broadcasters (in the widest sense). While there is much emphasis on a huge amount of low-grade material on some digital platforms, there is also a huge resource of very good material too. We perceive a need to find ways of keeping audiences informed and knowledgeable about what's available – a media literacy angle whose importance ACE has continued to stress.

Ofcom should continue to support public service content delivered via new media. Our concern is about how this can be regulated.

Interactive media offer routes to infinite choice and the ability to 'dig deeper' for those viewers particularly interested in the subject matter. A PSB remit for some new interactive media channels (with associated funding) would help kickstart high value content which will never evolve via a purely market-driven web.

Prospects for the future delivery of public service content

Do you agree with Ofcom's assessment of the implications of different economic scenarios for the UKTV market for the future prospects for delivery of public purposes?

Do you agree with Ofcom's analysis of the costs and benefits of PSB status?

We agree with the Review's need to focus on short, medium and long-term goals. We understand why economic factors have, and will, influence commercial TV companies in their decisions on programme making and regional provision in particular. We should be aware of some mischievous stories being aired which suggest that, for example, reduction in regional news and current affairs is a result of direction from Ofcom or Government. PSB status will still be highly prized by most operators, and this links to funding which we'll consider later.

A view was expressed that declining regional content from ITV will lead to even less incentive for the BBC to excel in this field.

There was a healthy variation of ACE members' views here, so both sides are represented.

Several members preferred the idea of commercial stations offering PSB because it makes business sense and did not think the licence fee should be shared with commercial organisations. They thought we should leave it to "the market" and not underpin PSB with public or BBC funds (or free spectrum etc).

Other members strongly disagreed and believed that the focus on the market (i.e. audience numbers) means focussing on the lowest common denominator and leads to a reduction in PSB – therefore subsidy and quotas for PSB become necessary, on whatever channels.

Meeting audience needs in a digital age.

Do you agree with Ofcom's vision?

The pace of change means that core values need to be stressed, rather than trying to fix a rigorous model which won't fit a

future which is hard to predict. Trust is an essential element, and broadcasters like the BBC need empowerment to build on this across a range, and a convergence, of platforms. There is a lot to be said about trust and about phone-in TV where that trust has been breached.

Plurality is a key angle and it is essential that a range of providers, in style and content, is encouraged. Well-run and anchored community radio will play a key role, and ACE have frequently discussed the increasing role of local and regional newspapers as broadcasters of video and audio through their increasingly significant website presence.

Plurality should be market led unless there is a particular social gain e.g. funded community radio to support back to work agendas, support for disabled people etc.

The existing model for delivering PSB will not be sufficient to meet changing needs in the future.

FUNDING PUBLIC SERVICE CONTENT

Again, a split of opinion.

Most believed that a new approach to funding public service broadcasters and providers is needed. The BBC may have to accept that it will have to compete for funds with other providers. While direct plans on licence fee are outside our remit, we would expect major changes from the current model.

The BBC is going to have to get used to fighting its corner on licence fee, especially in a world of diminishing regional service and huge fees for big name presenters funding from this source.

We would like to see a “menu” of needs and responses from a range of broadcasters and providers, including BBC and other

current PSB bodies. There should also be KPI and other evaluation to judge delivery against promise. The concept of a levy to fund PSB & PSP is attractive.

We accept that the original idea of a PSP being located in one or two areas of the country has withered, and we see a wide geographical spread of providers.

Minority ACE view – A smaller number of members did not think that we should dilute the licence fund and take it from the BBC to give to commercial broadcasters. If the British public want plurality, it should be left to the market or there should be a single funded PSB (public information service) that is web based.

If people want public service broadcasting they will demonstrate that by the providers they support.

OPTIONS FOR COMMERCIAL PSBs

We'd like to see much more structured thinking about the purposes of a range of current channels, including Channel 4 and BBC 3 & 4 – there would appear to be a huge drift away from original values and intentions. We like the idea of finding ways to subsidise methods of getting top quality output to a wider range of viewers through a wide variety of platforms.

The emphasis here has to be on wider platforms. However, we do not want public funds propping up ailing commercial stations, nor indeed commercial stations profiting from public money.

With such a major shift in viewing by young people, two BBC channels could be devoted to PSB (one with world-related content, one with a variety of info/entertainment).

We believe that Channel Four needs to re-assess its current focus on 17-24 year olds if it is to receive a slice of PSB funding. C4 has all but dropped its educational programming and serious documentary strands – we cannot have public funding being used for Big Brother and the like.

SCENARIOS FOR UK'S NATIONS REGIONS AND LOCALITIES

– While noting that Phase 2 will cover detailed proposals from Ofcom on ITV and its regional news in particular, we feel that this a crucial area for a wider consultation. While the market will lead, influence on quotas and out-of-London production is of great significance. It is essential that people see material originating where they live.

CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING

We would encourage positive attitudes from providers like BBC and Channel 4 to redress the dearth of good programming for children and teenagers. While we accept that it is often hard to define what exactly is programming specifically for these markets, it is much too important to neglect.

TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTING NEW MODEL

We agree with the need for urgency and would hope to see legislation in place by 2011 to set the course and tone for future provision.

AW – 13.6.08