

International Broadcasting Trust—written evidence (FON0006)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry: The future of news: impartiality, trust and technology

The International Broadcasting Trust is a UK charity working to protect and expand the spaces for international stories to be heard within the media.

We provide support and guidance to our members – over 50 leading international NGOs from across the humanitarian, development, and environmental sectors – helping them to understand the rapidly changing media landscape and harness outlets to highlight key issues. We also campaign to protect and expand the few spaces remaining for international stories to be heard, across public service broadcasting and the wider media landscape.

Our members include: Age International, BRAC, British Red Cross, CAFOD, ChristianAid, Concern Worldwide, Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), Global Canopy, HelpAge International, Hope and Homes for Children, Humanity & Inclusion, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Islamic Relief, Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Malaria Consortium, Malaria No More, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), Muslim Hands, Oxfam, Plan International, Practical Action, Restless Development, Saferworld, Save The Children, Sightsavers, SolarAid, Tearfund, The Freedom Fund, TreeAid, UNHCR (UK), UNICEF (UK), Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV), WaterAid, Women for Women International, World Food Programme, World Vision.

Introduction

The International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) welcomes the Select Committee's inquiry into the future of news: impartiality, trust and technology. We consider it timely and of great importance to our membership, which comprises over 50 leading NGOs from the humanitarian, international development, and environmental sectors.

IBT takes a strong interest in the UK's news media and international coverage across print, broadcast and online platforms. Coverage of foreign affairs provides critically-important opportunities to see and hear about issues well beyond our shores. By bringing international stories to domestic audiences, news providers help build engagement with foreign affairs, foster understanding of our interdependencies, and nurture empathy for important causes around the world. An outward-looking media is therefore essential for building engagement and solidarity with the critically important work undertaken by our members.

Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) continue to provide the most universally accessible source of news and current affairs, recording high levels of trust and use by audiences across the UK. As the BBC's founders believed, broadcasting can make the world a better place by enriching people with 'knowledge, culture and information about their world, to build more cohesive communities, to engage the people of the UK and the whole globe in a new conversation about who we are and where we are going'.¹

In recognition of its enduring trust, importance and universality, our submission focusses on our concerns surrounding the breadth and depth of news and current affairs coverage provided by the public service media system as a whole.

¹ *Building public value - renewing the BBC for a digital world*, BBC (2003)

Main submission

Our submission covers questions of impartiality and trust in news providers, with particular focus on Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) such as the BBC, Channel 4, ITV, and Channel 5. We also look at the necessary changes to the Media Bill currently in the House of Lords. We have not directly responded to the list of questions provided because our expertise does not qualify us to do so. However, there are other points we would like to raise which we believe raise significant issues related to trust and impartiality.

Impartial and trusted news from UK news providers

Whilst the nation's PSBs are generally perceived to perform well in terms of their news coverage, we believe that there is a significant failing in the breadth and depth of their international coverage and that this seriously undermines public trust particularly amongst ethnic minority populations.

We contend that, on the whole, PSBs continue to perform very well in meeting their obligation to provide fair, balanced, and duly impartial news and current affairs. They continue to deliver the highest standard of foreign reporting, which is recognised around the world for its quality, integrity and trustworthiness.

However, the news and current affairs provided by PSBs is highly partial in terms of its geographic and thematic focus. International coverage typically mirrors the preoccupations of UK foreign policy (Israel and Palestine, Ukraine and Russia, China and Hong Kong) whilst barely acknowledging other key stories that are shaping the world. Quantitative research by IBT, over the years, has shown a long-term decline in the breadth and depth of international coverage across all of the major news bulletins.

For example, the main news programmes and bulletins virtually ignore the conflicts in Sudan, Myanmar, and Ethiopia. This constitutes bias by omission, with serious consequences for how UK audiences understand global affairs and their impact on domestic matters.

Channel 4 News is notable for its enduring commitment to reporting on issues and places that are overlooked by other PSBs. Likewise, the international current affairs strand Unreported World (also produced by ITN) continues to provide a unique platform for stories about hidden corners of the world. Its very raison d'être and uniqueness indicates the shortfalls of international news coverage available elsewhere. Meanwhile, the BBC's new global news channel continues to only cover a very narrow range of (mainstream) stories, particularly by comparison to commercial news providers such as Sky News and Al Jazeera English. This is particularly surprising given the vast global resources that the BBC has to draw upon, not least through the World Service.

In 2023, Rwanda was the most hotly-debated African country in terms of UK domestic politics. Yet our monitoring found not a single current affairs programme exploring the political, social, and security circumstances in Rwanda was broadcast by the nation's PSBs. UK audiences had few, if any, opportunities, therefore, to reach informed conclusions about the safety of Rwanda as a destination for asylum-seekers, as proposed by the government.

Likewise, news bulletins and current affairs strands have done little, if anything, to help audiences understand the forces driving regular and irregular migration to the UK. This is a significant failure of PSBs in their role of informing and educating the nation, and helping to safeguard our liberal democracy. As the BBC Future project points out, news coverage is much more than a source of facts. 'From our attitudes to immigrants to the content of our dreams, it can sneak into our subconscious and meddle with our lives in surprising ways. It can lead us to miscalculate certain risks, shape our views of foreign countries, and possibly influence the health of entire economies'². A properly informed population is more likely to understand and value humanitarian approaches to tackling issues such as irregular migration, and less likely to support populist responses driven by fear and seeking division.

Several commercial news broadcasters are stepping into the vacuum created by the narrow perspective of (most) PSBs, by covering stories and reporting events from parts of the world that are under-reported or overlooked entirely. Sky News devotes significant resources to reporting stories from around the world. It recently launched a primetime one-hour foreign affairs news programme (The World with Yalda Hakim), broadcast Monday-Thursday, and has significantly bolstered its coverage from Africa which it hopes will appeal to diaspora populations. Al Jazeera English devotes much of its schedule to covering under-reported stories and amplifying unheard voices from across the Global South.

Whilst Sky News and Al Jazeera English (among others) produce excellent international content, significantly out-performing the PSBs in terms of geographic and thematic coverage, as commercial broadcasters without public service remits, they do so by choice not as part of their statutory obligations. In the case of channels such as Al Jazeera English, they reach much smaller audiences than PSBs are able and face criticism for their ownership and their own (perceived) editorial biases.

We believe the failure of traditional news providers to adequately and thoroughly report a broad range of international stories gradually erodes trust levels. Whilst PSBs and other traditional news providers maintain a very narrow international agenda, their audiences now have access to stories from all corners of the world, on a vast range of issues, through social media and other online/offline sources. We believe it is incumbent on PSBs, and other news providers, to significantly broaden the scope of their international coverage; to bring new perspectives and unreported stories to the news agenda. Connecting audiences to under-represented issues, via unheard voices, will go a long way towards restoring trust.

Impact of large technology platforms and online news aggregators

Audiences for the news and current affairs output of PSBs are perilously low amongst young people, and continue to fall. Ofcom reports that young people (aged 16-24) spent just 8.3% of their viewing time (with PSBs) watching news and current affairs programming, compared with 13.7% among all individuals. They suggest this is '*probably because younger audiences are increasingly getting a higher proportion of their news content from online platforms such as*

² *How the news changes the way we think and behave*, BBC Future (12 May 2020)

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as news websites and apps, rather than via broadcast TV news'. This is a concerning trend given the spread of mis- and dis-information throughout social media.

On the flip-side, social media platforms have enabled the PSBs to build new audiences for their news and current affairs output. Many of the main news brands have dedicated channels on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and X (Twitter). Some, like the BBC, have recruited journalists to produce content only for dissemination through social media. Channel 4 News has been particularly successful in harnessing social media to disseminate its reports. For example, its coverage of the earthquake in Syria and Turkey reached over 23 million people on TikTok, whilst the Unreported World strand has developed a strong presence on YouTube.

PSBs will need to adopt an outward-looking, internationalist, and politically pluralistic news agenda if they are to be successful in building and maintaining audiences through large technology platforms and online news aggregators. News brands that report on the wider world, telling stories from far beyond the narrow agenda of traditional news bulletins, are most likely to be successful with young audiences; developing strong bonds with and brand-recognition amongst the next generation of licence-fee payers and subscribers.

Required changes to the Media Bill

Whilst we welcome the introduction of the Media Bill, we believe the remit of the PSBs needs to be strengthened and that PSBs should be required to ensure easy access to public service media content online.

The government's Media Bill protects the universal provision and availability of news and current affairs by maintaining linear-only quotas. We welcome the protection afforded to this critically important content. Regrettably, the Bill removes protections and remit obligations for other important genres that embrace public service values, including programmes on 'matters of international significance or interest' as well as science, religion, and social issues.

The Bill is intended to support PSBs as they rapidly pursue 'digital-first' strategies that place online video services, such as BBC iPlayer and ITV X, at the heart of their operations. As BVOD (Broadcast Video On Demand) services are attracting greater audiences and becoming ever-more important means for transmission, so the Bill obliges PSBs to ensure that public service content is 'readily discoverable and is promoted by the service' (28/1, 362AA/3b). This protection regrettably only applies to content set out in the simplified remit. Nevertheless, at least news and current affairs will have to be prominent within BVOD services and easily found by audiences.

Critically, however, the Bill does not give Ofcom the necessary powers to access, understand, and evaluate the algorithms used by PSBs. Unlike linear channels with published schedules, the regulator and wider civil society cannot monitor how content is prioritised, presented and promoted within personalised streaming services. There is no way to evaluate whether important content is receiving the online equivalent of primetime or being consigned to the virtual

graveyard. Without access to the algorithm and operating principles, we cannot know whether the values and principles of public service media are being applied online, or not.

We believe that algorithmic transparency should be a prerequisite to obtaining PSB status. The Media Bill should, therefore, be amended to include obligations on PSBs to disclose the operating principles behind their online video services, including the algorithms used to determine how content is served to audiences, to Ofcom.

The EU's Digital Services Act requires large online platforms (search engines, social media sites, etc.) to disclose information about their algorithms to regulators and submit relevant data to independent auditors. We believe the EU's approach to 'algorithmic transparency' should inform the Media Bill in developing safeguards and appropriate regulation for the online delivery of public service media.

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