

Written evidence submitted by Dr Karen Fowler-Watt

COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEE – THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

1. Submission by Dr Karen Fowler-Watt, Senior Principal Academic in Journalism, Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University: also, research theme lead for journalism education (Journalism Education Research Group) in the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP) at Bournemouth University and member of the Ofcom Media Literacy Network.
2. This submission responds to this area of reference outlined by the Committee:
 - **Impact:** What value, if any, do PSBs bring to the UK in terms of economic (local and national), cultural and societal impact?
3. *The following submission focuses specifically on the news and current affairs output of PSBs. It argues that PSBs bring significant value to the UK in terms of societal impact, but that this impact could be enhanced substantially with initiatives that focus on marginalised voices, diversity and inclusivity. Cognisant of the ‘key worker’ status afforded to public service broadcasters in the Covid-19 pandemic, it specifically addresses the question of whether it would be timely to review the core values of PSBs, such as impartiality in order to provide a more inclusive and relevant service to wider audiences. This would facilitate an emotionally literate approach to the journalism of PSBs and enhance their value and salience.*
4. Dr Karen Fowler-Watt is available to respond to questions or for further comment. She can be contacted by email at: kfowler-watt@bournemouth.ac.uk or by telephone on 07876 453 743. Further information on her career and background is available here:

<https://staffprofiles.bournemouth.ac.uk/display/kfowler-watt>

<https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/centres-institutes/centre-excellence-media-practice>

Introduction:

5. The Covid -19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of fact-based, verified journalism that can be trusted. The Government decreed that journalists’ work is considered “critical to the Covid-19 response” and awarded key worker status to all journalists informing and communicating with the public on the coronavirus¹. Trust levels for PSBs appear to have risen, with a survey published on 28 April 2020 by the

¹ See report in the Press Gazette, Available here: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/government-gives-key-worker-status-to-all-journalists-reporting-on-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) finding that 60% of those surveyed “think that the BBC is doing a good job” and Channel 4 (32%) and Sky (28%) all received “higher evaluations than many newspapers”.² However, a YouGov poll of 1652 people for Sky News found that two-thirds of the public do not trust TV journalists and that the public is supportive of the government and its policies in “rallying around the flag”. The remit of journalists to hold power to account can be seen as ‘unpatriotic’ at a time of national crisis. A special Covid-19 report for the Edelman Trust Barometer found that major news outlets are relied on nearly twice as much as global health organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), although journalists are the least trusted to tell the truth about coronavirus, with scientists the most trusted.³ This submission argues that, in a context of declining trust in journalism it is imperative for PSBs to provide trusted news that comes from a wide range of sources and includes a plurality of voices. The pandemic has highlighted socio-economic disparities that are often reflected in media coverage and it is now crucial that PSBs scrutinise closely their core values, the inclusivity of their newsrooms and their news coverage, as well as the training opportunities for future journalists in order to enhance their impact through greater transparency and salience.

Contextual challenges and threats:

6. PSBs were already facing significant challenges and threats prior to the pandemic. The age of big tech and ‘post-digital’ now offers a plethora of platforms for information; ‘fear narratives’ of populist rhetoric exacerbate ‘othering’ and stereotype, emanating from a fractured politics that depicts the media as the ‘opposition’; the noise and overload of social media and the ‘CNN effect’ of 24/7 news can turn people away from mainstream media towards their personalised filters; the rise of the ‘alt-right’ dominates the share of voice and has helped to spawn the fake news phenomenon; propaganda, disinformation and lies lead to distorted debates, false balance and an inability to debate issues openly and honestly. These contextual challenges result in an enhanced sense of *ennui*, a fatigue with news that can arise as much from fear as indifference⁴ an outcome that is particularly problematic in the current crisis. They can also lead to ‘safe’ programming and parachute journalism⁵ that fails to listen, so compounding marginalisation and rendering the voiceless, more voiceless.

Voice, diversity and inclusivity:

² Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Covid-19 research project: Fact Sheet 1, 28 April 2020. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-media-broadly-trusted-source-coronavirus-information-views-uk-government-response-highly>

³ <https://www.edelman.com/research/edelman-trust-covid-19-demonstrates-essential-role-of-private-sector>

⁴ Sontag, S (2004) *Regarding the Pain of Others* London: Penguin

⁵ Journalism that relies on reporters to be ‘in situ’ for the story, who fly in and fly out to cover it, but have no in-depth knowledge of or connection to the community.

7. This submission argues that a step change in inclusivity within PSBs would make a significant contribution to enhancing their social impact in an era of distrust, where the marginalised in society feel more marginalised. The pandemic is already seen to be worsening the north south divide nationally, according to coronavirus modelling by Public Health England scientists, and internationally⁶.
8. Examples of calls for change from a range of powerful voices within the industry add weight to this argument: Dorothy Byrne of Channel 4 in 2019 at the Edinburgh TV Festival: *We can't reflect society properly ourselves if we ourselves don't reflect society when you change who is making TV, you change TV*; Paul Keenan from Bauer for an Ofcom podcast in 2019: *If we don't look like the communities, we signal that we are not of the community and people ... with a different background are not welcome*. In 2018, the Cairncross Review called for a greater emphasis on local reporting, with reporters embedded in local communities. The failure of journalism exemplified in the reporting of the Grenfell tragedy in 2017 had highlighted the need for reporting from within communities by those whose stories the journalists are telling. Channel 4 News anchor, Jon Snow was vocal in his call for change after Grenfell, where he felt he was “on the wrong side of the social divide” and that the media’s comfort at being positioned “within the elite” was “dangerous”.
9. The awareness articulated by leading journalists, such as Snow, within the public service broadcasting sector provides urgent calls to action and it is important to acknowledge that PSBs, supported by the regulator Ofcom, have made some strides towards improvement. However, in 2019, the House of Lords Committee was still calling for greater diversity in PSBs: evidence submitted to its report ‘Public Service Broadcasting: As Vital as Ever’, upheld the important contribution of PSBs to society, but called for a full range of cultural diversity.
10. This submission argues that, whilst there is clearly a keen awareness of the need for greater diversity within the individual PSBs (for example, the BBC’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2016-20) and the regulator (Ofcom), the lack of progress stands out as a signal failure for the PSBs. The submission argues that there is clearly a need for greater empathy and emotional literacy as a route to a more inclusive journalism, that engages audiences and has impact.

Core values:

11. Young people are also turning away from mainstream news: in 2019, Ofcom reported that the BBC was at risk from losing young audiences to streaming services such as

⁶ There is evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated the north south divide in England and in Europe, where varying levels of debt test unity in the Eurozone: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-eu-debt-analysis/pandemic-wont-cause-euro-debt-crisis-but-a-north-south-divide-idUKKCN2240NI>

Netflix and YouTube. Many young people do not feel that the news speaks to them, turning instead to personalised news feeds and stories shared by their social circle. The findings of a fake news and media literacy project led by the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University and funded by the US Embassy in London, found that young people felt powerless and so trusted a range of opinions on social media, even if this resulted in confirmation bias.⁷ The young people who engaged in the workshops for this project were not particularly interested in impartial news, seeking instead a range of opinions to reach a balanced picture. A disregard for the normative values of journalism, such as impartiality and fairness, and a preference for personalised news feeds is not confined to young people: in the workshops, their media teachers and academics admitted that they were more likely to engage with news that conformed to their world view and/or was recommended by friends through shares on social media. This presents a problem for the PSBs' core values and mission, founded on the shibboleth of impartiality and dedicated to accurate, fair (and thereby, implicitly, trusted) journalism.

12. The concept of impartiality was put under the spotlight by the recent Naga Munchetty affair, where the corporation's editorial complaints unit initially ruled against the BBC Breakfast presenter after she expressed her fury at President Trump's call for 4 US Congresswomen to "go back home". The BBC's Director General, Tony Hall had to reverse the decision, declaring that the BBC is not impartial on racism. Here the issues of apparent elitism, lack of inclusivity combined with the BBC's attachment to the value of impartiality inflicted lasting damage to the BBC and its core values.
13. The impartiality debate also leads to questions about accountability: before the pandemic, political debate in the UK had moved to unregulated platforms such as Facebook Live, with the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson showing a preference for direct to the people communication rather than an appearance in the 08.10 slot on BBC R4's *Today* programme. This issue strikes at the heart of the question of whether PSBs are sufficiently valued. Arguably many of the answers to this question are inherent in the PSBs themselves.
14. When it comes to issues of trust, the fake news and media literacy project workshops (see point 11) showed that transparency is more valued than impartiality. If people can see the workings of journalists, through transparent approaches to verification and fact-checking, they are more likely to trust their reporting. Fact-checking and showing that fact-checking is a regular, routine operation within a news organisation offers a counterpoint to allegations of bias.

⁷ Media Literacy vs Fake News: Critical Thinking, Resilience and Civic Engagement (2019): the media literacy toolkit can be accessed here: <http://mlfn.cemp.ac.uk>

15. The PSBs have made some progress in this area, with fact checking units, verification desks and online guides to spotting fake news. The BBC's online guide to understanding the coronavirus and how to spot disinformation relating to the pandemic provides an example of value and societal impact, informing the public and raising awareness at a time when anxiety levels are high, and disinformation is rife.

Why PSBs' brand identity is important

16. The debate around core values illustrates a key problem for PSBs – whether people understand what they are, what they do and why they are important in civic society. This submission argues that, whilst media insiders might know what PSBs do, the public are less aware of the remit of public service broadcasting, the core values on which their journalism is founded and their contribution to civic society. This can lead to a defensiveness (as illustrated in the Munchetty incident), which in turn breeds risk averse programming. In addition, declining trust levels (despite the higher trust levels for TV news) brand PSBs as part of a mistrusted and self-serving media elite: this is the cost of disbelief.
17. The notion of 'public service' might have had a renaissance in the pandemic, with the 'clap for keyworkers', but arguably the majority of the British public still do not know what public service broadcasting means or why it might be a good thing. For many, it will continue to be regarded with some suspicion along with politicians, civil servants and other professions that are often branded as self-serving and elitist. There needs to be a conversation about how much PSBs are even understood, let alone valued.

Recommendations:

18. This submission argues that the journalism produced by the news and current affairs sections of the PSBs have significant value in terms of economic, societal and cultural impact, but that much more needs to be done and makes the following recommendations:
 - i. The PSBs should seek greater collaboration between themselves, avoiding short termism and in areas where competition is not an issue so that they can join up their thinking around piecemeal, individual initiatives in areas where there is a broad consensus. There are individual journalists and policy initiatives within each of the PSBs (aside from target-setting) and these could be shared and jointly discussed to develop a sustainable and dynamic network to engage with issues of inclusivity and voice. This could lead to, for example, an agreed set of principles and policies on diversity in terms of recruitment, board membership and content which can be audited.
 - ii. The value of the PSBs, notably the BBC in offering the best route towards building sustainable local journalism should also not be underestimated and the drive to community and neighbourliness

currently evident in lockdown can be captured in strong local journalism that serves its community, but also holds power to account with in-depth local investigations. This will require investment but is key to strong civics.

- iii. The core values and mission of public service broadcasters and their journalistic storytelling should be shared openly and transparently. Fact checking and verification units have gone some way towards greater transparency and building trust, but the PSBs need to find ways of showcasing and explaining their remit and their work (perhaps with the support of the regulator). To interrogate these core values critically and to share the findings reflexively to highlight the value of e.g. transparent fact-checking or how impartiality can facilitate a plurality of voices in reporting.
- iv. Greater understanding will lead to more ‘buy in’ as people will feel included in a less elitist, more bottom up, inclusive and community driven approach to journalism which is by them and for them. The example set by participatory websites such as the Dutch non-profit Global Voices and its recent community project to design workflows and determine future directions⁸ provides a useful point of reference here.
- v. The awareness of issues of marginalisation, voice, inclusivity and core values need to be conveyed through empathic and emotionally literate journalism that is trusted to seek the widest range of sources and voices in fair and accurate reporting.
- vi. This awareness needs to be conveyed in the training of journalists within news organisations in house training programmes and university journalism courses. The main accreditation bodies for journalism training: the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ); the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) can play an important role in highlighting the importance of inclusive and emotionally literate reporting that displays empathy.

19. If PSBs can collaborate effectively to avoid marginalisation and show transparency and self-awareness in applying and conveying core values, they will tell the stories of others in a way that is more inclusive and empathetic. This will lead to higher quality journalism that is trusted by its audiences, making the value of and impact of PSBs more explicit.

20. The current period of turbulence provides an opportunity for PSBs to prove their worth. These recommendations seek to ensure that PSBs can become resilient

⁸ The Global Voices Community project offers an interesting example of a consultative and inclusive approach to sharing values and mission: <https://community.globalvoices.org/guide/organizational-guide/community-council/community-consultation-2018/>

leaders offering participatory, salient and bold journalism that exemplifies their civic impact.