



New News, Future News

Responses to the Ofcom
discussion document

October 2007

Introduction

New News Future News (published July 2007) examined how policy objectives for television news are currently being delivered; and how PSB television news fits into the broader news environment.

It raised questions about whether those established policy objectives are still relevant; and identified areas where delivery of television news may be less effective now than it has been in the past.

Finally, it looked ahead to digital switch-over to assess what effect that might have on the commercial and physical environment for news, particularly when considered alongside other media developments taking place at the same time.

Four main policy areas were identified for particular consideration in relation to on-going policy objectives. These were:

- The prospects and relevance of plurality in national and international news;
- The economic sustainability of news for the UK nations, regions and localities;
- The concerns about disengagement from news among some sections of society;
- The practicality and desirability of on-going requirements for impartiality in television news.

In each policy area, Ofcom identified issues for debate and posed some further questions. This document summarises the responses Ofcom has received from stakeholders and others.

N.B Two industry stakeholders asked for their entire responses to remain confidential. Their comments have been noted, but are not included in the summaries below. Some respondents asked for particular sections of their responses to remain confidential.

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Section 1

Plurality in national and international news

ITV said it was important to provide national and international news coverage as part of a mixed genre, mass appeal schedule – even without regulatory intervention – and it would expect to do so well into the future. As Ofcom’s research shows there remains a strong demand for national and international news from viewers, who consider it an important feature of the output of all public service broadcasters, with 80 per cent of people saying news should be on the commercial PSBs. The provision of news also makes some commercial sense even if the associated revenue does not match costs.

ITV believes it is important that there continues to be competition and plurality in national and international news up to and beyond DSO. ITV News performs a particularly important role in attracting large scale audiences to news. It is the only commercial news service that is regularly watched by audiences of several million. This is an important function in providing competition to BBC News. But plurality should be about more than ensuring just one alternative to BBC News. If Channel 4 is to remain a core part of the PSB mix, it should be held to obligations concerning quality and its continued delivery in peak time in competition with other TV news services, particularly given its relative cost-effectiveness for the channel.

ITV went on to say it was worth noting that it is not necessarily possible to rely on sources of plurality from outside the main PSBs. For some years, and particularly during the debates about competition and plurality in news during the passage of the Communications Act, it was widely assumed that Sky News would be a key deliverer of plurality as the ‘third force’ in television news. Notwithstanding the relatively tiny audiences that 24 hours news channels attract, and their predominant appeal to ‘heavy’ news consumers, Sky News has now ceased to be available on digital cable and its future on DTT is uncertain. This effectively means that it only provides plurality in satellite homes and cannot be relied upon to guarantee plurality alongside the BBC in future. The issue at stake is not plurality per se, in terms of pure volume of news, but plurality of high quality, well resourced news provision. This is where the role of ITV and the other PSBs has traditionally been of most value – and where the focus of debate about plurality should be centred.

It should not be overlooked that national and international news is expensive, and the obligations around editorial resources and volume of programming are extensive. For this reason, provision should not be taken for granted. The level of regulatory intervention should therefore be kept under review to ensure that it works both in the interests of delivering value to viewers, but also enabling ITV to provide a quality service at an affordable and appropriate level.

Channel 4 endorsed Ofcom’s suggestion that “news should remain a central element of the Channel 4 remit”. The distinctiveness of the news service is important in serving the democratic process. The particular international focus (40% of the Channel 4 News agenda is non-UK focused) also provides the public with an important alternative to that on offer on the BBC and ITV.

C4 agreed with Ofcom that, whilst evidence from other countries suggests that the main networks are likely to sustain some commitment to national news provision even in a completely free market, in such circumstances “there may still be grounds for intervention in terms of quality and resources”. The channel does not believe that a duopoly of news

providers is sufficient: in a democracy, voters need a guarantee of alternative providers of high quality news and we believe that Ofcom should be seeking to identify ways in which it can guarantee provision of high quality national and international news beyond the core publicly-owned broadcasters.

The channel challenged Ofcom analysis which suggested the main channels had broadly similar agendas. Channel 4 News has a wider, more diverse coverage of stories than any of its terrestrial competitors, often covering stories not covered elsewhere.

Channel 4 identified the importance of sharing ITN resources with ITV. Should ITV reduce its regional provision, Channel 4 would either need to replace it, at considerable additional cost, or make editorial changes to the programme that would diminish its quality. The net effect would be that, if ITV lost its obligations to provide regional news, extra funding would need to be found to enable Channel 4 to continue to provide news to an equivalent breadth and quality as it does today.

Ofcom questions whether it is reasonable to include other, non-broadcast, sources of news in a consideration of plurality. Of the major ways in which news can be accessed (television, newspapers, radio, internet, magazines and mobile phone), television and radio are the only media which are regulated to protect fairness, accuracy *and* impartiality. Channel 4 considers this to be a valuable difference, and one worth protecting.

David Hutchison of Glasgow Caledonian University noted that commercial television companies - for example CTV in Canada - seem to be able to offer a substantial news service in highly competitive markets, which suggests there is no reason why ITV should not be expected to do likewise. It is perfectly legitimate for Ofcom to lay requirements on ITV and Channel 4 with regard to news provision, and if these organisations are unwilling to accept such requirements, they have the option of surrendering their licences to other broadcasters who would be prepared to do so.

The Ofcom Advisory Committee for Scotland agreed that news will continue to play an important part for TV companies into the future – whatever regulation exists – but said it would be foolhardy to trust the market to deliver. It isn't too difficult to imagine circumstances where new owners (potentially non UK based) might take a short term view and reduce news output to save costs.

They said it was right to emphasise the importance of the BBC, but there were dangers in leaving the 'trusted provider' status to the BBC alone, particularly in the Nations. The nagging question remains whether it needs competition to keep it 'honest' - and it should not be up to the BBC alone to set the news agenda.

It is worth reminding Ofcom that radio currently plays a hugely important role in providing local news 'from where I live'. In a separate submission the Committee has warned against the consequences of reducing localness provisions on radio licensees too far.

The National Union of Journalists said it was important to maintain and strengthen regional, national and international news coverage. The union believes that significant public service programming, including regional news and non-news, should be made available free-to-air on all platforms. Government should set the regulatory framework and ask Ofcom to ensure policies are carried out.

The NUJ does not accept Ofcom's view that the main channels will continue national and international news without regulatory intervention. Although the economics of such programming remain favourable, and the current leadership of ITV appear committed to national and international news, this cannot be taken for granted. Owners change, as do the

economics of broadcasting, and Ofcom needs to 'future-proof' the delivery of this public good by ensuring that effective regulation is in place.

It is not the case, as Ofcom suggests, that regulation is more difficult post switchover. The scarcity of DTT spectrum and the range of delivery options available shows that a new system, based on the principle of universality and the provision of PSB programming, can be the basis for a new compact. Primary legislation may be required but new levers could be deployed to ensure that quality PSB continues. These include tax exemptions or reductions concerning licence fees and spectrum fees (if these are introduced). Others include:

- Digital Spectrum: Some of the terrestrial PSB organisations are lobbying to be given gifted spectrum (to be used for HDTV). If this were to happen, it would greatly benefit the citizen. However, the NUJ believes that spectrum should only be given in return for specific PSB commitments. In the same way that the analogue PSB compact relied on the terrestrial broadcasters providing certain desirable PSB goals in return for access to the analogue spectrum, some spectrum capacity should be set aside for PSB organisations that guarantee to provide continued PSB commitments.
- Listed events: In analogue terrestrial television, the Government has enshrined certain 'listed' events (e.g. sporting) in legislation. These must be available to the public free-to-air. In the digital age broadcasters holding PSB status could be given certain commercial advantages in bidding for these specified 'listed' events. As above, in return, broadcasters would commit to providing free-to-air content across all platforms, including providing specific PSB characteristics such as regional, national and international news.

Section 2

Television news for the UK nations and regions

ITV said 'regionalism' remained central to the channel's identity and its relationship with viewers. It is highly valued by viewers, but is also the area of the ITV1 schedule that faces the most acute and immediate commercial pressures.

However, ITV also recognises that regional news is a unique asset to ITV in terms of value to viewers, perception of the channel, and competition provided to the BBC. It is hard to imagine any other entity being able to set up and operate a fully fledged regional news service of anything like that provided by ITV. It is vital that there is a robust and sustainable model for regional news designed to help support its future continuation and to incentivise ITV's ongoing investment in the interests of UK viewers.

One option would be to simply get rid of regional news services at Digital Switchover (or even earlier) and replace it with lower cost and higher earning network programmes. However, this is not the option that ITV favours. ITV believes that regional news can and should be sustained, but regulatory remedies will be required to do so. They said this was an opportunity to reshape the delivery and modernise regional services so that they are sustainable and fit for purpose for a digital age.

ITV agrees with the possibility that the modernisation of the ITV regional map would reduce the cost associated with regional news. The shape of the map has more to do with the accident of the transmitter patterns than with services that best serve the viewers' interest. Four ITV regional programmes cover around half the UK population. ITV proposes to re-evaluate the regions, examining where some regional and sub-regional news services might be combined.

ITV is also interested in the 'macro-regional hub' idea put forward by Ofcom for post-switchover, whereby regional news studio facilities could be combined, whilst maintaining newsgathering in the relevant region.

ITV also welcomes Ofcom's recognition that reform of the advertising minutage restrictions might be a further way to help sustain regional news investment. ITV believes there is a strong case to amend the rules on advertising minutage, by effectively creating a carve-out around news provision. However, any such change would not be enough to make regional news sustainable of itself – it would need to be part of a package of measures to make the proposals that ITV has outlined workable.

ITV believes that local services delivered by broadband will make an increasingly valuable additional contribution to nations/regions news provision in future. New delivery platforms such as ITV Local may have an important role to play in the overall provision of regional news in a digital world. However, it is important to note that the ITV Local model relies on the access it has to the core ITV newsgathering infrastructure. It would be naïve to assume that broadband-based news of sufficient depth and breadth could be provided by many players in the market.

Ofcom raises the option of offering financial incentives such as a discount on spectrum price to help sustain regional news. However, ITV says this form of incentive might also be appropriate to offset other public service costs in other areas, such as different genres and it

may not, therefore, be possible to target solely at regional news as part of the future public service compact.

The Advisory Committee for Scotland said the changing political background, which may lead to further devolution within the Nations, meant the provision of relevant and regular news is likely to become more important for the public good rather than less. They therefore felt some form of back-stopping regulation will be needed.

There is research evidence suggesting citizens value the opportunity to access news 'from where I live' even if they only make occasional use of it. The important thing is that they know they CAN when something occurs which matters to them.

The Advisory Committee challenges the notion that the case for PSB regulation diminishes as the 'privilege' of being awarded scarce radio spectrum reduces. It says there will still be broadcasters who will value the licences sufficiently to be willing to take them on with some regulatory burden attached. The committee supported suggestions in the report that incentives might be appropriate, such as reduced spectrum charges and increased advertising minutage around local news. However, the committee was not convinced that trying to link the revenue from such minutage directly to the cost of running the news service was practical or advisable.

The Advisory Committee was broadly supportive of the concept of Local TV, but doubted whether it would be universally available for some time – if ever. Therefore it was wrong to put too much store by its potential to replace current news provision – remote and rural areas for example were very unlikely to get such a service. The suggestion that the PSP might have a part to play in supporting news and local current affairs provision on such services was well worth further consideration, and may play a useful role in trying to engage those who are currently 'disengaged'.

The Ofcom report asks if devolved governments might have a role in funding news within the nations in some way. The Advisory Committee says there is a certain logic to this, but the risks are obvious and significant. First, government funds are always under pressure and unless protected in the longer term would come under threat on a regular basis. Second, the temptation for interference in the news agenda (even if only subtly) would be a concern. If this idea were to be pursued the committee would recommend some kind of arms length process managed by a neutral agency.

Channel 4 said it is vital in a democracy with a system of both local and national government to maintain a plurality of local and national news provision. It would be no more reasonable for the BBC to be the sole supplier of regional/national news than it would for them to be the only national and international news provider. As well as plurality arguments, there are competition ones. Competition between BBC and ITV regional news ensures quality news provision is maintained. Whilst the development of local TV models was welcome, Channel 4 did not believe this was an adequate alternative to the kind of regional and local TV news service currently supplied by the BBC and ITV terrestrially.

There is no doubt that the continuing provision of national and regional news will come under considerable funding pressure, particularly after digital switchover. However, cutbacks in ITV's regional infrastructure should not be considered in isolation from the broader debate about the future of national news.

Channel 4 also responded to Ofcom's suggestions about new funding arrangements for nations/regions news. These ideas ranged from a relaxation of the rules on advertising minutage around regional news to direct funding from the new, devolved administrations. The channel said each of the proposals put forward was extremely complicated and had

profound implications in its own right. They all warranted much more detailed examination and analysis. However, Ofcom will retain some significant levers to encourage ITV or some other provider of regional news beyond digital switchover. The ongoing value of these levers should not be underestimated.

Since the publication of Ofcom's document ITV has announced its intention to reduce the number of regional news programmes offered in England and Wales from 17 to 10. Channel 4 said Ofcom needs to consider not simply whether such a change is in ITV's economic interest but also whether it is in the broader public interest for the number of regional and/or sub regional services to be reduced.

S4C said it was the only existing outlet for Welsh language television news and, as a public service broadcaster, its provision was a key part of the programme schedule. However, achieving plurality in news provision was extremely difficult. Conversely, Current Affairs programmes are commissioned from different sources, enabling S4C to provide a degree of plurality in this genre.

At Digital Switchover, S4C will become a stand-alone Welsh Language channel, with no requirement to show Channel 4 programmes as it does at present on the analogue service. The challenge for S4C in the multi-channel world is to continue to offer a unique perspective for audiences in the sea of 24-hour news and information, and deciding on programme priorities in an ever-expanding news agenda. If the proposals to extend children's services are given government approval, S4C will further develop its news service for children and young people.

The Gaelic Media Service (Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig) said it was establishing a new Gaelic Digital Service in conjunction with the BBC. It would be launched early in 2008 on satellite, cable and online, and on digital terrestrial television in line with the timetable for digital switch-over. Although news content for the digital service is to be provided exclusively by the BBC, there was no reason why ITN or other news providers should not carry Gaelic news on other television channels. Indeed, the GMS would welcome plurality of Gaelic news provision and a healthy debate on the kind of broadcast news that best serves the Gaelic audience.

The GMS noted Ofcom's recognition of the political, cultural and institutional differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In discussing and consulting on the future of news, Ofcom should be cognisant of the situation in Scotland, particularly in light of the establishment of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission, which is to conduct an independent investigation into the current state of television production and broadcasting in Scotland and define a strategic way forward for the industry, taking account of the economic, cultural and democratic importance of broadcasting to a modern, outward-looking Scotland.

Dave Rushton of the Institute of Local Television said the scope of the upcoming public service broadcasting review should embrace the news needs at the local civic scale. He accused Ofcom of seeking to "leapfrog.... from national PSB via a decaying regional representation straight to individual/community of interest services via PSP on broadband." This failed to represent the social civic dimension of news provision within identifiable communities served by local PSB - on TV.

In response to New News, Future News he urged Ofcom to be more accurate in identifying 'local'. He said Ofcom should settle on local as an urban or rural council area - this is particularly important now that these councils can actually hold licenses and must use them to reflect their local responsibilities. Secondly, news relevance is the key issue. News for some is not news at all (if they know it already) or it is also irrelevant (because they are not interested).

Section 3

Engagement and disengagement with television news

Channel 4 said it agreed with Ofcom that disengagement by young people and people from ethnic minorities is an issue which broadcasters must address. There was much in Ofcom's analysis and provisional conclusions that warranted further debate. The issue of disengagement by young people and minority communities goes much deeper than watching broadcast news; there is a general problem in the UK with disengagement with politics.

Broadcasters, particularly public service broadcasters such as Channel 4, have a role to play in seeking to make politics an attractive subject for viewers, but engaging citizens with the political agenda is at least as much a challenge for the machinery of government and the political parties.

Ofcom's research demonstrates that viewers increasingly believe that television news is not relevant to 'me'. Channel 4 says this perception highlights the difficulty facing the popularisation of politics, as increasingly, people believe that what happens in Parliament and Whitehall has nothing to do with them as individuals. Newspapers have met this challenge by increasingly covering a much broader agenda in an attempt to attract and retain readers, adding more and more entertainment and lifestyle features to supplement hard news. The challenge for broadcasters is to present the hard news in a way which is both relevant and interesting.

The fact that there is an increase in respondents who say that they only follow news when something important or interesting is happening demonstrates that viewers are becoming more discriminating. Given the wide choice of interesting material that can be accessed through multi-channel television, it is not surprising that news has to fight for its share of viewers.

There needs to be an understanding of what attracts young people to news. For many young people, 'issues' are more interesting and relevant than standard news stories. In this era of 24-hour news channels and the internet, some young people are less interested in the usual list of today's events than they are in the ongoing stories about the issues of the day: climate change, homelessness, street violence, and so on.

David Hutchison of Glasgow Caledonian University said disengagement was indeed a very serious problem and is one of the consequences of the development of the 'multi-channel universe'. Efforts have to be made to ensure that the news agenda is wide enough to interest the disengaged, but that does not mean the provision of more celebrity oriented news. Nor should it mean offering more ghettoised news services. There are deeper social, political and educational problems here for which broadcasting cannot be held responsible, although it does have a contribution to make to the solution.

ITV said Ofcom's research shows that there are some parts of the population – notably young people and minority ethnic groups – who feel more disengaged from television news and the democratic process than others.

One way of addressing disengagement might be through the proliferation of online/new media news sources. Ofcom's research suggests that younger people are higher users of new media than older people – with more 16-24s using the internet than the population as a

whole. Similarly, new media appears to be a means of reaching some minority ethnic groups, and particularly young Asians.

While it cannot be guaranteed that these more disengaged groups would turn to traditional, high quality news providers via online sources, it is notable that the major broadcasters now offer a comprehensive choice of news services on new media platforms, featuring interactivity and participation which might be of more interest to younger viewers.

However, disengagement is not a new phenomenon. The idea that there is a worsening problem of disengagement or that new sections of society are becoming more disengaged should not be overstated. Furthermore, while there may be an increased sense of disengagement from traditional, mainstream news sources, disengagement from more niche or specialist sources of information may be much less, thereby suggesting that certain sections of society are engaged in different, but no less valid ways.

The National Union of Journalists said it agreed with Ofcom that issues surrounding political disengagement go much wider than broadcasting. However, broadcasters have an obligation to seek to engage with all audiences and communities. In many ways this ties in with the impartiality issue raised above. In addition it's about greater technological access for people. The NUJ supported the notion of news being delivered on multiple platforms and via mobile devices.

Section 4

Impartiality in television news

The Advisory Committee for Scotland said news consumers in the UK take it as a ‘given’ that news from broadcasters is broadly impartial. We risk much if we throw that away altogether, yet there is a good case for reviewing how it is regulated. The committee’s main concern is that viewers are used to impartiality being the norm, and so some means would have to be found to make them aware if some sources were, in future, not subject to the same restrictions.

Channel 4 said it agreed with Ofcom that the provision of impartial TV news by the PSBs, in particular the BBC and Channel 4, remained important. This was reflected in the high percentage of viewers who said that impartiality in news is important to them. The channel therefore believed that impartiality rules should be retained for the PSBs.

Furthermore, the channel believed that impartiality rules provide the bedrock upon which all standards in UK TV news broadcasting are built, and so the rules should be retained for non-PSB licensed UK TV news suppliers too (e.g. Sky News). Given that virtually 100 per cent of TV news viewing in the UK is to programmes provided either by the BBC, the commercial PSBs or Sky, relaxation of the impartiality rules for non-PSB TV providers would effectively create a single, potential partial news supplier – Sky News.

If, in this scenario, Sky News were to adopt a particular political agenda (whether left or right) it would leave one or more political parties without any voice in the TV news market. This would represent a very different situation to the one which exists in the newspaper market. In light of the massive explosion in choice and opinion that is being facilitated by the internet, which is not regulated for impartiality, Channel 4 would suggest that there is little reason currently to deregulate TV news in this way.

Channel 4 rejected any suggestion that impartiality rules stifle debate and restrict the range of voices that can be heard on TV. If broadcasters are failing to provide enough breadth of opinion generally in TV news then this is an issue that can be addressed without removing the impartiality requirements.

Ofcom suggests that impartiality will become less enforceable in future. But Channel 4 says impartiality is a core regulatory function in UK broadcasting regulation. All content regulation will become increasingly difficult to justify as regulated services exist side by side with unregulated ones, but this does not mean that it will be unenforceable for licensed services. Indeed, it is likely that the fact that a service is licensed, and therefore regulated, will become a valuable sign of trustworthiness for consumers. Arguably, with a plethora of news sources, it is ever more important for viewers to be able to identify who it is they can trust for an objective view.

Ofcom also suggests that relaxing impartiality obligations on some non-PSB channels might attract disengaged youth and members of ethnic communities. Channel 4 is unconvinced. Newspapers, which have clear editorial lines, also have difficulty in attracting these segments of the population. The real answer must lie in how the news is presented and the range of stories covered, not in permitting news to be anything other than objective and impartial. What is needed is a national conversation, involving politicians, representatives from ‘disengaged groups’ and broadcasters and other media to explore ways in which society can involve and reflect the involvement of all of its members.

David Hutchison of Glasgow Caledonian University said he preferred the term ‘fairness’ to impartiality. Without it, trust - which has been very seriously undermined in both the BBC and non-BBC sectors of late - would be fatally damaged.

He said it followed from this that to allow more partial news, so that we end up with the equivalent of a Daily Mail and a Daily Mirror of the airwaves, would be disastrous. If people wanted partiality, then they can read these and other papers. The tradition of honesty and fairness - linked with a willingness to stand up to the powerful in the interests of ensuring that citizens in a democracy can have access to a reasonable approximation of the truth - is one that should not be thrown away. It is one of the major contributions the UK has made to broadcasting

ITV too said impartiality was an important tradition in broadcasting that over the years had built a valuable relationship of trust with viewers. Viewers regularly express recognition that broadcast news – and in particular TV – news is significantly more impartial than other news sources.

In terms of the idea of loosening impartiality rules on some more niche or specialist news providers, ITV believes this would undermine the tradition of impartial broadcast news and act against the public interest. This could have a knock-on effect to the overall perception and confidence in broadcast news across the board.

It is clear that some groups use niche and specialist news services to a greater extent than others. However, they are not necessarily considered to be ‘niche’ by those people who use them. If such news sources are the principal or only source of news for some people, the lifting of impartiality rules would remove access to an impartial news source for those people.

ITV said there was no reason why news agendas or choice of stories cannot be different, whilst retaining an overarching duty to be impartial. Editorial focus is different to impartiality: impartiality should have less to do with being niche or mainstream, and more to do with ensuring that the service can be relied upon to be duly impartial and provide balanced coverage.

Julian Petley of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom said it was a matter of great regret that Ofcom “appears to have been perfectly content to let the Press Complaints Commission assume regulatory responsibility for the content of newspaper websites”. But it was a matter of even greater regret that Ofcom was involved in the revision of the Television Without Frontiers Directive which resulted in it becoming the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. He said it was “a really significant opportunity” to regulate a degree of public service provision into on-line news which had instead seen a regulatory measure mutating into a ‘deregulatory’ one. Proposed regulations that would have acted in the public interest were replaced by those which work in the corporate interest.

Ofcom’s report was correct to point out that newspaper and other broadband websites are delivering audio visual news that has many of the characteristics of television. He said if it looked like television news, it was to all intents and purposes television news, and should be regulated as such. To pretend it could not be done showed a lack of political and regulatory will.

Mr Petley said very few of the stakeholders interviewed for Ofcom’s report actually questioned the desirability of due impartiality in television news. Equally, there would appear to be little demand for relaxation of the impartiality rules amongst those questioned for the research.

Ofcom quite rightly asks what might be done to encourage greater levels of engagement among young people and those from some ethnic minorities. However, he strongly urged Ofcom *not* to abolish or in any way weaken the current regulations on impartiality. To do so would send British broadcast news and current affairs “hurtling straight down the same road followed with such deleterious consequences by most British newspapers”. Britain has one of the most respected broadcasting ecologies in the world, but its press is regarded by many as the worst in the West. To do anything which risks turning the former into the latter would be the height of folly and irresponsibility.

Furthermore, one of the main arguments adduced by Ofcom for relaxing the impartiality regulations could equally well be cited as a key reason for maintaining or even strengthening them. Multiplicity of news sources by no means guarantees diversity, still less reliability, of news sources. Mr Petley quoted the BBC’s Peter Horrocks from a Reuters Institute lecture in November 2006: “tailored news services, internet TV and radio stations, blogs and other new interactive services now offer various minority segments and interest groups news that cater for highly specialist tastes. Those niche services offer their audiences information that often has the effect of re-enforcing their prejudices ... This part of the online world clubs together in networks to exchange information with like-minded people. The internet is in danger of becoming an enormous exercise in preaching to the converted”.

It was his view that allowing more opinionated, overtly biased ‘news’ channels to flourish would put an intolerable burden on those channels still required to be impartial. It is impossible to tinker with one part of the complex broadcasting ecology without producing profound – even if unintended – consequences in another.

Fair competition requires that all broadcasters offering news and current affairs programmes should be subject to the same regulations. Impartial broadcasters would inevitably be pushed towards opinion-mongering and partiality by the de-regulated ones. Impartiality is important in the interests of social cohesion.

Lord Lipsey said there was a clash from time to time between impartiality and diversity – but he did not think that clash was likely to occur frequently or be beyond resolution with ingenuity. As a parliamentarian, he said, impartiality seems far more important than diversity. Diversity can be obtained in other non-TV ways, including newspapers and in various developing net-based media.

TV however has a singular authority. Moreover, he feared that we lived in a society where people avoided being exposed to people who disagree with them, which makes negotiating the necessary compromises harder and harder. Of course, there was always the BBC. But if other providers were able to go in for diversity, especially opinionated diversity, it would put increasing pressure on the BBC to go down the same or analogous routes to retain reach and share.

A private individual, **Mr Michael Gill of Harbourne in Birmingham** said he would welcome any proposal to allow niche services greater flexibility in the production of news. Although the BBC was charter-bound to be impartial, in reality “you could write a book about the areas where BBC news fails to meet this requirement”. There was a soft-left, liberal, pro-EU, pro-multiculturalism, anti-US and anti-Israel bias within the BBC. To counter the BBC hegemony within the UK he believed the time had come for broadcasters to be given news broadcasting flexibility.

The National Union of Journalists said impartiality rules for PSB broadcasters should not be relaxed and should remain a legal requirement. However they sympathised with concerns about the existence of regulated and unregulated services side by side. In this mixed landscape it was even more important that impartiality was maintained across all television

services. But it is questionable whether previous definitions of impartiality, relying on a political left/right axis, were appropriate. In a modern context broadcasters should use a wider definition of impartiality, similar to that described in the recent BBC report *'From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel'*.