

Submission by Professor Robert Beveridge FRSA (University of Sassari)

to the OFCOM consultation on the review of the BBC's representation and portrayal of the diverse communities of the UK.

1

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference of this review of representation and portrayal need to be clearer with regard to their focus.

For example, it can be argued that the term '*community*' allows for too wide a range.

One would not wish to be other than inclusive and respectful of the need for diversity.

It is also the case that specific communities and interests; ethnic minorities, the aged, those with disabilities -which also entails a substantial range of concerns and issues, the LGBT community etc - have legitimate rights to see themselves represented and portrayed, authentically, in and across a range of genres.

Each community deserves research which develops our understanding of their voice(s) and policies which reflect and address their specific concerns.

The terms of reference of this research need to be more specific and focussed otherwise there will be insufficient attention to each of the groups cited above.

I suggest that the focus here should be the nations and regions per se,

2

Beyond the BBC

There also needs to be a commitment this research and any findings and recommendations finding being applied beyond the BBC per se.

In 2011, I asked OFCOM if it would take account of the BBC Trust 's independent commissioned report from Professor Anthony King

THE BBC TRUST IMPARTIALITY REPORT: BBC NETWORK NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS COVERAGE OF THE FOUR UK NATIONS

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/uk_nations_impartiality.pdf

It was and is inconceivable that the then limitations of BBC news and current affairs reporting of the evolving UK were not also present in other PSB providers, notably ITN, Channel 4 news etc

The response from OFCOM, on 11/10/11 was as follows:

We do not consider it to be our role to make licensees aware of the recommendations of a report like King because by doing so we would in effect be making those recommendations an adjunct to our own rules. Whilst we do refer to pieces of Ofcom research in our code guidance, we do not refer to any third party research.

This was a very great pity because it seems a reasonable assumption that the main news rooms of ITN and Channel 4 were and **are** not free of the same cultural predispositions, news values and metropolitan biases as were found in the BBC

The position taken by OFCOM at that time would be untenable for the purposes of this proposed research as this will be OFCOM's own research

Now that OFCOM have responsibility which includes regulating all and not only some of the BBC, ie PSB as a whole., then it would be self limiting and unfair if the recommendations and regulatory initiatives (if any) which result should not be applied to other broadcasters licensed by OFCOM.

This is especially the case with regard to the PSB licensees. There needs to be a commitment by OFCOM to a level playing field with regard to representation and portrayal issues.

Since news and current affairs are a component part of representation and portrayal, leaving aside for the moment questions of accuracy, balance and impartiality, it seems evident that your proposed research should

(1)

pay due attention to the benchmark research undertaken by Cardiff University

(2)

take on board the assessment written by Professor King

(3)

take account of these 2008 research findings in the context of the current analyses. Although the methodology and focus may differ and an exact comparison is not possible, the general issues and problems remain broadly the same

OFCOM's Responsibility

OFCOM's own research – cited in these terms of reference states that

While three in four viewers say it's important that our public-service broadcasters show the different kinds of cultures present within the UK, only two-thirds see this happening

Given that the BBC led the way, in part, in 2008 with a sound analysis in the King report, it is obvious that it is not just the BBC which has failed to address these problems but OFCOM itself.

The BBC did improve aspects of its performance but the problem is more deep rooted than just the BBC. OCOM are also responsible for these problematic research findings in respect of representation and portrayal.

OFCOM needs to remember that it was, in part 'light touch regulation' which allowed the further removal of much of the regionalised character of ITV licensees and programming.

The citizen interest, which is OFCOM's primary duty under the Communications Act (2003), was not upheld and the dissatisfaction amongst both citizens and consumers –as evidenced in the OFCOM research - is one result.

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