

Title:

Forename:

Surname:

Representing:

Organisation

Organisation (if applicable):

ITV Meridian NUJ Chapel

Email:

What additional details do you want to keep confidential?:

No

If you want part of your response kept confidential, which parts? :

Please keep my name confidential

Ofcom may publish a response summary:

Yes

I confirm that I have read the declaration:

Yes

Additional comments:

As a local chapel of the NUJ, we are only responding to Questions 2 of the consultation, as this is the one that directly affects us.

Question 1: Do you agree that the existing obligations on Channel 3 and Channel 5 licensees in respect of national and international news and current affairs, original productions, and Out of London productions should be maintained at their current levels? If not, what levels do you consider appropriate, and why? :

Question 2: Do you agree with ITV's proposals for changes to its regional news arrangements in England, including an increase in the number of news regions in order to provide a more localised service, coupled with a reduction in overall news minutage? :

We would welcome a return to a more localised service as we feel this will provide a more personalised experience for viewers, while guaranteeing journalists' jobs at a time when the industry is under great pressure.

However, following a round of job cuts in the technical teams across all ITV regional newsrooms, the remaining employees are faced with a greatly increased workload. If more than one member of staff is off due to sickness or on leave, it is frequently the case that we do not have sufficient staff numbers to cover all shifts. There is a limited budget for sickness or absence cover, amounting to only two days worth a week. Our current output between 6pm and 6.30pm amounts to 45 minutes a night. The way management have explained ITV's proposals to us, this would increase to 1 hour 10 minutes - two half hour opts for East and West, with a 10 minute Thames Valley opt within the West opt.

Since September, the chapel's calculations show that our numbers of full-time equivalent staff have decreased from 74 to 66. Both figures include one full-time vacancy that has not been filled. They also include a staff member whose redundancy has been deferred, as they have filled a succession of maternity cover contracts. This staff member is currently away on long-term project work and has not been backfilled. On top of jobs lost to cuts at management's insistence, several people decided to leave and have not been replaced, despite repeated requests to management.

Before the job losses, we were operating with the equivalent of 72 full-time members of staff. We are now operating with the equivalent of 64 full-time members of staff. A further three members of staff are due to leave at the end of this month. One of those will be replaced. This will leave us with a recorded total of 64, although the effective operating total will be 62, because of the circumstances mentioned in the previous paragraph. There is a slight margin for error in calculating these figures, as up to date staff lists were not available.

The company's proposals project that our number of full-time equivalent staff to produce the new services will be 65.5. It suggests this is an increase of 3.5 roles in the total headcount. Given that our calculations put the current recorded headcount at 64, the chapel does not believe this will be the reality. This 65.5 figure includes a voluntary redundancy position that will be filled by the staff member currently on long-term project work and the full-time post that has been vacant for several months. Even taking into account any slight errors in calculation of staff numbers, ITV's proposals would see our output increase by more than half, but with no corresponding rise in staffing levels.

Although the chapel welcomes a return to more localised services, it believes it is inevitable that the quality of output will suffer if these services are not properly staffed. There will be no scope for producing long-term stories that require in-depth work. On-screen journalists are likely to be pushed towards "easy" stories that require the minimum of time and resources, but that do not make good journalism or good television. Time pressure is particularly likely to have an effect on the quality of journalism when we are expected to pre-record 40 minutes of content a day, leaving no leeway to include it should a major story break in the afternoon.

If Ofcom is willing to support greater regionality in local news, providing a truly relevant service for viewers, we would suggest that the Thames Valley Opt out is a live broadcast, with appropriate numbers of staff to run it, including a dedicated number of reporters and producers, extra production specialists to form a gallery team and separate presenter. This service would allow us to compete on a more level playing field with the BBC's output in the

same area, providing a genuine alternative, which can only be of benefit to viewers.

In the same vein, we would suggest an increase in reporting staff is needed in the East half of our region, above the numbers already suggested by ITV for the service as a whole. The Maidstone office is being asked to effectively double its output to a full half hour, but ITV's proposals only include for 5 on-screen journalists to provide content for this. There would also be 2 in our Brighton office providing content for East and West, but even including this, the East of the region has a potential maximum of 7 contributors, whereas West and Thames Valley have a potential maximum of 14 (this figure includes the 2 Brighton on-screen journalists). Even one more reporter in the Maidstone office would greatly help in the provision of so much extra content, and would help ensure the quality of the opt content.

In other areas, we reject the idea that reducing the proportion of local content to 20 minutes of the programme would create "a more focused news agenda with a higher proportion of hard news" on the basis that there would be "less need to fill programmes with softer material on slow news days".

The nature of regional news varies greatly across the UK. In the Meridian region, so-called soft news is the mainstay of the programme. These items are not produced to "fill" the programme, they are produced because they are largely a reflection of what is happening in the area. When this is not the case, our programmes rightly show this, but reducing the amount of local content required in Meridian's programmes will not change the news agenda, and we will still need to fill the airtime.

We also believe that the reduced length of lunch and late bulletins does not provide a quality service for our viewers. We already provide an opted late service, but this will be cut almost in half, inevitably degrading the news service through the time constraint placed on bulletin producers. The reduction of the length of the lunchtime bulletin will also give viewers a much poorer offering. Even though the plan is to provide regional opt outs, the bulletin will be exactly a fifth of the current equivalent BBC service. The chapel does not believe this change will serve our viewers. The same staffing numbers will still be needed to produce these bulletins then as now, so we do not see how this serves ITV in terms of reducing staffing costs. It has been suggested that viewing figures for these bulletins are not especially high. If the durations are reduced further, it is difficult to see how figures could be maintained or even increased. Viewers know when they are being provided with a bad service and will switch off accordingly.

In summation, we support the principle contained in the plans - that of greater regionality - but think there is still much work to be done on how ITV's proposals would be implemented in practice.

Question 3: Do you agree with UTV's proposal for non-news obligations should be reduced to 90 minutes a week? If not, what alternative would you propose and why? :

Question 4: Do you agree with the proposals by STV to maintain overall minutage for regional content in the northern and central licence areas of Scotland at 5 hours 30 minutes a week, as detailed in Annex 3? If not, what alternative would you propose, and why? :

Question 5: Do you agree with the proposals by ITV to maintain the overall minutage for regional content in Wales at 5 hours 30 minutes a week, as detailed in Annex 3? If not, what alternative would you propose, and why? :

Question 6: Do you agree with the proposals by ITV to reduce the overall minutage for regional content in the Channel Islands from 4 hours a week to 3 hours 20 minutes as detailed in Annex 3, while maintaining the present provision of a 30 minute early evening regional news programme? If not, what alternative would you propose, and why? :

Question 7: Do you have any views on any other aspects of the nations and regions programming and production obligations of the Channel 3 licensees?:

Question 8: Which option would you prefer in respect of the news and current affairs in the Border region, and why? :

Question 9: If option 2 were to be adopted, should ITV be required to provide separate transmission for the Scottish and English parts of the region on DTT? :

Question 10: If you would prefer a different option to those set out in Questions 8 and 9 above, please explain what, and why:

Question 11: Do you agree that the Border licence should be amended to reduce the proportion of regional production required to a sustainable level? If not, what proposals would you like to make? :

Question 12: What views do you have on the proposal by STV and UTV to extend peak time to 11pm, which would extend the window in which they could schedule regional content that must be shown in peak time?: