

Northern Ireland Screen submission to OFCOM's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review

By: Richard Williams 4th December 2008

Introduction

Phase 2 of OFCOM's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review (the 'Review') is built upon the findings from Phase 1 and is influenced by the consultation responses from Phase 1. However, Northern Ireland Screen is concerned that the particular set of issues and concerns relating to Northern Ireland elicited from OFCOM's own accumulated data and the consultation process in Phase 1 do not appear strongly represented in the Phase 2 document.

This feeds a growing general concern that at a time of huge flux in the Public Service Broadcasting arena, provision for Northern Ireland will be an afterthought rather than systemically addressed.

Rarely in the Review is Northern Ireland addressed specifically outside of the basket of devolved nations. One example of this is the proposal to reduce must carry regional programme quotas in line with Scotland and Wales despite Northern Ireland having the strongest demand for UTV output as evidenced in the Review Research¹. An equally important example is the failure to highlight the extent to which Northern Ireland has been locked out of portrayal on network public service broadcasting – while Scotland and Wales rightly argue that they are grossly under-portrayed within UK PSB network broadcasting, their plight is modest by comparison to the historical blanket ban on seeing or hearing Northern Ireland on UK PSB network broadcasting.

Northern Ireland Screen cannot understand why OFCOM, having defined Public Service Broadcasting purposes to include ***Reflecting UK Cultural Identity*** and ***Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints***, has left these critical benchmarks behind in this subsequent discussion about PSB provision for the nations, and Northern Ireland in particular.

Even in the context of the narrower debate on the future for ITV/UTV as laid out on page 78 of the Review, to list the 'particular issue' pertinent to Northern Ireland as being the availability of RTE and say nothing of the fact that Northern Ireland is neither portrayed on UK PSB network channels or providing a voice within UK PSB network channels is to ignore the single most distinguishing factor regarding Public Service Broadcasting in Northern Ireland. This is against the previously gathered statistic that 80% of people in Northern Ireland rated network portrayal as important against an average of 61% and the highest rating in the UK by a full 10%.

While it is completely understandable that Northern Ireland is only one small subset of the overall challenge for the future of Public Service Broadcasting within the United Kingdom, ***it is very clear from the consultation and OFCOM's own data that there are specific issues for Northern Ireland that require specific and tailored solutions.*** In this regard, Northern Ireland Screen welcomes OFCOM's statement at the workshop in Belfast on the 13th November that it is open to different and tailored solutions for each of the nations.

¹ Page 68 OFCOM Second Public Service Broadcasting Review – Phase 2 56% main source of news about your nation & 73% disagree with BBC being the only news provider. In each case the highest figures in the UK.

The Present PSB landscape in/for Northern Ireland

In summary, the PSB picture in Northern Ireland is as follows:

1. A complete failure in representation on the PSB networks using either of the two key PSB tests of ***Reflecting UK Cultural Identity*** and ***Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints***. Northern Ireland is not presently reflected anywhere within the UK's PSB provision. Nor do Northern Ireland based producers, either within broadcasters or independent production companies, contribute to the range of viewpoints available on the UK PSB networks².

In this regard, Northern Ireland Screen repeats its main comments from its first submission:

- We strongly welcome the BBC's decision to redress this long standing imbalance in relation to its network programming. However, we remain concerned that the completion date of 2016 is unnecessarily distant weakening the stated ambition and leaving it open to distortion at a future date.
- We are deeply disappointed that Channel 4's strategy 'Next on 4' had no significant either direct or implied commitment to television network portrayal or production relating to Northern Ireland. While we strongly welcome the 4IP fund and see this as a significant development, it cannot be seen as a counterbalance to the absence of network production either sourced from or portraying Northern Ireland.

With regard to Channel 4's very real financial crisis and the need for a new model of funding to be found for Channel 4, Northern Ireland Screen submits that commitment to portrayal and production from Northern Ireland is ***cost neutral*** for Channel 4 as a publisher broadcaster. Therefore, Channel 4 could considerably enhance its Public Service Broadcaster value by addressing the issues of production and portrayal for Northern Ireland - and indeed the nations generally – at no extra cost. Evidence of this point could be extrapolated by comparing the viewing figures for the very small number of programmes commissioned from Northern Ireland with similar programmes produced elsewhere.

2. A strong duopoly of local news and regional programme provision provided by the BBC and UTV. That this is prized in Northern Ireland is well documented within the Review and the Phase 1 Review. Further evidence of this is the unanimous motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly expressing concern regarding the OFCOM's proposals to reduce UTV's obligations in this area and UTV's subsequent job cuts, seen as being causally linked to OFCOM's proposals.

Northern Ireland Screen accepts OFCOM's analysis of the declining value of PSB status for ITV and shares OFCOM's concern that this has the potential to undermine UTV which

² PACT's Nations & Regions report of November 2008 clearly evidences this point including the extent to which the under provision in Northern Ireland is vastly more acute than in the other nations.

piggybacks on the ITV schedule. Northern Ireland Screen also supports OFCOM's assertion that alternative news provision to the BBC is important in Northern Ireland.

3. The provision of indigenous language programming in Northern Ireland is also strongly at odds with the other nations.

The variance in economic investment is startling - £94 million annually from DCMS for S4C, a total of £21.7 million from the Scottish government and the BBC for Gaelic in Scotland, and a total of £3.95 million per annum in Northern Ireland from the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the BBC. As is the case with network production, even on a pro rata basis the level of investment is much lower than in the other nations. Provision for Ulster Scots is considerably less again amounting to one series on BBC Northern Ireland.

Even more important than the disparity in levels of investment, is the difference in terms of structure. S4C is arguably the most stable element of the whole PSB landscape in the UK, Gaelic in Scotland has a new channel in MG Alba while the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund was due to terminate in March 09 until a short term 2 year intervention was negotiated at the highest political level. There is no reason to assume that a similar stay of execution will be negotiable in 2 years time.

OFCOM correctly considers indigenous languages an important part of PSB provision in the UK. Accordingly, and particularly because broadcasting remains a reserved matter, OFCOM must present a stable solution to government on the future structure of Irish Language production funding in Northern Ireland.

The Solution

4. Historically, Northern Ireland has been well served in only 1 of the 3 main areas of Public Service Broadcasting; that is, local news and other local programmes. It has been very poorly served in the other two areas – network production/portrayal and indigenous language provision.
5. Northern Ireland Screen submits that any future model for PSB must deliver adequately across all three of these key areas. Given the complete failure in 2 out of 3 areas and the very obvious pressure on UTV's provision of news and regional programming, the evolution model is not fit for purpose for Northern Ireland.
6. As stated in our previous submission, the BBC/Channel 4 model does not presently provide the necessary assurances across the 3 PSB priorities identified. The BBC has subsequently strengthened its commitments to portrayal and production from Northern Ireland and has made modest increases in its commitments to Irish Language programming but Channel 4,

while a fine broadcaster from a UK wide perspective, has delivered nothing that would suggest it is going to contribute significantly to production and portrayal from Northern Ireland without being forced. Further, it does not seem like a plausible platform for local news opt outs or Irish Language content. Accordingly, this model does not appear fit for purpose for Northern Ireland

7. The competitive funding model does have the potential to be fit for purpose for Northern Ireland. This is largely because it is much easier to write in the necessary obligations to a competitive fund than it is to police similar obligations with a broadcaster – this is the overwhelming experience of Northern Ireland over the last decade. Concerns about this model seem to mostly revolve around how radical it appears but we would question the notion that a competitive model has to be incredibly radical – on the contrary, we can envisage a scenario where it is almost unnoticeable from an audience point of view in the early years.

For example,

- A competitive funding model could offer an annual or two year contract for regional news provision. It is entirely plausible that the first successful bidder for this contract would be UTV. Accordingly, the audiences experience of regional news in Northern Ireland would in the short term remain unchanged.

However, should ITV pull the schedule from under UTV in the future, the tender could be secured by another channel including RTE, TG4, UTV in conjunction with TV3 or a new consortium.

- A competitive funding model could have clear obligations to Irish Language programming in exactly the same way that the Irish Language Broadcast Fund does now. The broadcast delivery would remain unchanged with BBC Northern Ireland and TG4 delivering the vast majority of the programming.

However, the stability of Irish Language provision could be secured through the fund have a statutory basis regulated by OFCOM.

It could equally have obligations to Ulster Scots.

- A competitive funding model could almost instantaneously deliver production and portrayal on UK network television. It is already perfectly clear within UK network broadcasting that third party funding sources are sufficiently in demand to prescribe the necessary parameters to deliver portrayal and production for Northern Ireland.

Notably, there is no reason why Channel 4 couldn't benefit from this strand of the funding.

8. Obviously, the key question is where the funding comes from. Other than to explore the digital switchover surplus, Northern Ireland Screen is not supportive of top slicing the BBC License fee. This is simply robbing Peter to pay Paul and makes little sense given that this Review is entirely predicated on the BBC remaining as the cornerstone of public service broadcasting.
9. Once again, Northern Ireland Screen would emphasise that the portrayal/production issue for Northern Ireland does not require additional funding, merely redistribution of funding already in the system. However, we do acknowledge that local news provision and indigenous language provision do require additional funding.

Short-term regulatory decisions

10. Mindful of the level of public disquiet at the cuts at UTV, the Northern Ireland Assembly's recorded concern and the extremely high levels of support for UTV regional news and non news programming captured in OFCOM's data, Northern Ireland Screen rejects OFCOM's proposed quota reductions for regional news and other programming in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Screen is of the view that this is dismantling the present model before there is any plan in place for the new model to deliver alternative news provision in Northern Ireland.

11. We submit that OFCOM's proposed Channel 4 quota of 3% from the devolved nations is hopelessly inadequate. 3% from Northern Ireland and 17% from the devolved nations would be appropriate if Channel 4 is to be deemed part of the solution in redressing portrayal/production issues in the nations.