



NUJ response to the consultation on the request for change of licence conditions relating to the provision of news output on Channel 5.

July 2021

1. Ofcom has said it expects to accept the licence variation requested by Channel 5 in relation to its news provision, to facilitate the replacement of the two 30-minute news broadcasts at 17:00 and 18:30 in its current evening schedule with a one-hour-long news broadcast from 17:00.
2. The NUJ is concerned that there will be less news being shown at peak time but acknowledges the viewing figures for the 18:30 programme are low.
3. C5 said: “An hour long 17:00 bulletin would provide room for the programme to add depth to stories and create space for more investigative, regional and social affairs news reporting.” It accepts that “moving to a one-hour programme as described would necessitate increased investment in production costs for Channel 5”. The original remit makes it clear that “news programmes shall be of high quality and deal with both national and international matters”.
4. The NUJ’s members are concerned because the present news operation is run on a shoestring. There is a headcount of fewer than 50 and while there are experienced journalists, a good deal of the production staff is not. Moving to a one-hour programme would require a doubling of news stories (the previous schedule allowed repetition of stories). Staff have been told that the format of two-minute packages will remain, which undermines the C5 assertion that new schedule will allow investigative and in-depth reporting. The staff are constantly being told that money is tight, and they have no evidence to show that there will be significant investment in the new programme. Indeed, they have been told to expect to cover more weather and royal stories.
5. The NUJ fears that if the present headcount prevents it from producing quality journalism required over a one-hour format, this will be reflected in the viewing figures and C5 will be back to Ofcom ask to reduce the programme to half an hour.
6. The NUJ is also concerned at the attempt to change the remit in the light of the proposed privatisation of Channel 4. While the government may say it would protect the news provision of Channel 4 as part of the remit, a prospective buyer could note

the ease at which Channel 5 was potentially able to change its remit and make a bid with a view to asking to reduce its news coverage at a later date.

7. Previously Ofcom has allowed ITV local news production to be reduced by around a third and its approach to regulating the provision of commercial local radio news has led to its virtual demise. For example, Global Radio replaced its 40 local breakfast shows across the UK with just three nationwide programmes, all out of London. Ofcom did nothing when ITV slashed its current affairs coverage, including World in Action.
8. When London Live made an application in 2014 to reduce cutting peak-time local content, Channel 5 objected saying: "Having made this decision in a competitive process, we believe it would be unfair to the other applicants and undermine the process if Ofcom was to allow a substantial dilution of the station's programme commitments after it had been on air for just five months. Such a decision would send the wrong message to other [local TV licence] holders. We ask Ofcom to reject the most far-reaching of ESTV's requests."
9. In October 2014, the London TV service was given the go-ahead to reduce its local programming repeats from 10 to six hours a day, and from an hour and a half to zero in peak time (6pm-10.30pm) by Ofcom.
10. The pandemic has shown the value of having a trusted and accurate news source and Channel 5, together with the other UK public service broadcasters, won praise for its news coverage and it boosted its viewer numbers. Channel 5 is largely an entertainment channel and has a different viewer profile to the viewers of Channel 4 and BBC 1; its news reflects this as part of the PSB ecology.
11. All democracies require balanced, impartial news coverage which do not depend on the personal prejudices and foibles of media moguls, commercial pressure to appease shareholders or government interference. A functioning democracy cannot exist without a plural, trusted and vigorous media; the UK's PSBs should provide the bedrock for this.
12. The NUJ believes that in order for Ofcom to accept C5's proposals, it must exact binding guarantees from the broadcaster that it will invest in its news gathering and production teams so it can provide the volume and quality of stories and packages for the new format and thus carry out its remit and gain the advantages of being a PSB.