

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE RESPONSE TO OFCOM PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING REVIEW (PHASE 2)

Introduction

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has serious concerns with regards to the proposals contained in Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review (Phase 2). The Committee is of the view that the proposals fail to address the unique needs of Northern Ireland in relation to public service broadcasting, and that they threaten to undermine the quality, quantity and diversity of local broadcasting in the future.

The provision of local news

The Committee is opposed to Ofcom's proposal to reduce the minimum requirement for news from 5 hours 20 minutes per week to 4 hours per week. The Committee is of the view that the quantity of local news should be maintained at the current level and developed in the future.

Local news in Northern Ireland plays a key role in the life of communities here. There is a need for in-depth news broadcasting as Northern Ireland moves into a post-conflict era. At a time when the political institutions are bedding down, people are interested in everyday concerns. It is a false argument to claim that news coverage does not need to be at the same level as it was when the conflict was at its height. People are interested in news today, in the workings of our political institutions, in the various Departments, and in general day-to-day news. What may be appropriate levels of local news for England, Wales and Scotland are not necessarily appropriate for Northern Ireland, where the process of 'normalisation' is still in underway.

The existence of two high quality news broadcasters, namely BBC Northern Ireland and UTV, is vital. Competition drives up standards, and if one station is allowed to cut back on its news production, there is a danger that the whole genre will be subject to a 'dumbing down' effect in the future. The Committee believes that Ofcom should be working proactively to avoid a situation where BBC Northern Ireland has a virtual monopoly on local news production.

Furthermore, any reduction in the news quota is likely to lead to a loss of jobs in the broadcasting sector, and this is of huge concern to the Committee.

The provision of local non-news programmes

The Committee is opposed to Ofcom's proposal to reduce the weekly minimum requirement for non – news programmes from 3 to 1.5 hours in Northern Ireland. It is of the view that the quantity of local non-news programming should be maintained at the current level and developed in the future.

The Committee is concerned that a reduction in the quota will lead to a loss of high quality local programming on UTV. Indeed UTV has already indicated that programmes such as UTV Life, Insight and sports coverage will be discontinued. UTV Life, as a 'soft-news' programme contains the type of positive, engaging local news items that help to build up a real sense of community cohesion which is important for this society going forward. It is well acknowledged that UTV's Insight programme and BBC's Spotlight programmes have provided high quality investigative journalism, and that the competition between the programmes has driven standards up. Northern Ireland has a distinctive political culture and, therefore, reporting here must include the extra dimension that investigative journalism provides and which is important for basic democratic discussion. It would harm democracy in Northern Ireland if there were only one platform, namely the BBC, for political debate on television.

Other high valued programmes such as Lesser Spotted Ulster could also go in the future. People in Northern Ireland are interested in quality local programmes that provide creative opportunities for local people and give a platform to local talent. Any reduction in the quota is likely to lead to a loss of jobs in the broadcasting sector, and this is of huge concern to the Committee.

When Ofcom appeared before the Committee on Thursday 20 November 2008, it stated that its proposal merely sets a floor, not a ceiling on local non-

news production. The Committee does not accept this argument, and is of the view that Ofcom must recognise that by lowering the quota it is highly likely that UTV will reduce its programming accordingly.

Role of the BBC in Northern Ireland

The Committee notes that Ofcom has come to the provisional conclusion that the BBC should remain the cornerstone of public service content, and its core programme and services budget should be secure.

While the Committee commends the good work done by the BBC, it takes issue with the idea that the BBC is the cornerstone of public broadcasting in Northern Ireland. The Committee believes that the situation in Northern Ireland is different from that in England, Wales and Scotland. In Northern Ireland, UTV has higher viewing figures than BBC Northern Ireland.

Therefore, the Committee urges Ofcom to recognise the key role which UTV currently plays in Northern Ireland with regard to public service broadcasting. In doing so, Ofcom would be acknowledging the public support that exists in Northern Ireland for UTV as a public service broadcaster.

The importance of competition between UTV and the BBC

The Committee is of the view that diminishing the quotas for both news and non-news programming on UTV, will lead to less plurality in terms of local broadcasting. The Committee is of the view that the provision of public service broadcasting beyond the BBC is an essential part of any future system.

In that regard, the Committee is particularly concerned that Ofcom is proposing to reduce UTV's minimum output while at the same time the BBC is proposing to increase its programming for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland by forty percent. When this is added to the fact that UTV is pressing ahead with plans to cut jobs, there is a real danger that the BBC will find itself in an unrivalled position when it comes to producing in-depth reportage on all aspects of Northern Ireland life.

The Committee would emphasise the point that there is a need for two high quality local broadcasters with a public service broadcasting outlook. The Committee is of the view that UTV must continue to have public service broadcasting obligations going into the future to ensure competition continues.

The need for more local portrayal and production

The Committee is very concerned about the low levels of portrayal of Northern Ireland on all the main UK networks. The Committee is of the view that Ofcom needs to work hard to address this issue going forward.

The Committee welcomes Ofcom's proposals to raise Channel 4's out-of-London quota from 30% to 35% from 2010, and to introduce a new quota for Channel 4's productions from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, also from 2010.

As part of the Programme for Government, increasing the output of the creative industries is hugely important in Northern Ireland. The Committee thus welcomes proposals which would have the potential to create more jobs in the creative industries in Northern Ireland. The Committee is of the view that more local programming would stimulate growth in the creative industries, and would point to how TG4 has created jobs for the Galway region as evidence of that.

Promotion of indigenous languages

The Committee is of the view that local broadcasting in Irish and Ulster Scots forms/should form an important part of public service broadcasting, and must be taken account of in Ofcom's Review.

The Committee notes that stakeholders, such as Screen NI and independent producers, point to the merits of establishing a fund for public service broadcasting, highlighting the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund as a model of best practice and success in this regard.

There should be appropriate and adequate provision for both the Irish and

Ulster – Scots languages. There should also be appropriate and adequate representation of indigenous cultural traditions. Language - based programmes may be set in a cultural context but language and cultural broadcasting should not be conflated in determining the level of provision. Such provision for Ulster - Scots and Irish language broadcasting will require adequate and specific funding streams.

Proposed cuts to UTV staff

The Committee point to the fact that there is a general perception among stakeholders that the Ofcom proposals have enabled UTV to come in with a prepared plan of redundancies. The Committee do not accept the argument put by Ofcom that it has no responsibility in this regard.

The Committee is of the view that the fact that UTV has cited the Ofcom proposals as one of its reasons for making redundancies, devalues and undermines the entire consultation process.

Consultation process

When the Committee heard from Ofcom on 20 November 2008, it was told that there has been a low response to the consultation. The Committee is of the view that the public is not aware of the long-term impact that a reduction in public-service broadcasting will have. There is a need for a wider debate on the future of long-term and medium-term broadcasting and on what models for the delivery of public-service broadcasting are best to serve this society. The Committee therefore believes that Ofcom should extend the consultation for a further 3 months until March 2009, and take concerted efforts to make the public more aware of the Review.

Conclusion

All 11 Members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee participated in a debate in the House on Monday 24 November 2008 regarding the Ofcom Review and the proposed redundancies at UTV.

The motion of that debate was:

That this Assembly expresses concern at Ofcom's proposals for a diminution in the public service obligations of UTV through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes; calls on Ofcom to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and programming; calls for the extension of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation period for a further three months; and further calls on UTV to suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of this consultation process, and following meaningful consultation and negotiations with the trade unions representing staff at UTV.

The motion was put and agreed to. The Committee requests that Ofcom pay heed to the points made by Members in that debate¹, and the support from the Assembly for the above motion.

¹ Please see enclosed Hansard.