

April 2013

IBT Response to the Ofcom Consultation on Channel 3 and Channel 5: proposed programming obligations

In response to the request from Ofcom for comments on these proposals, the International Broadcasting Trust submits this paper.

IBT welcomes the fact that Channel 3 and Channel 5 have not proposed any changes to their national and international news and current affairs obligations.

We also welcome that no changes have been proposed to the original production or independent production quotas by either channel.

Thus, in answer to Question 1 of the consultation, IBT agrees that there should be no reduction in the existing obligations on Channel 3 and Channel 5 licensees in respect of national and international news and current affairs, and original productions should be maintained at their current levels.

However, IBT would like to propose that Ofcom should monitor the delivery of international current affairs. Ofcom used to monitor the amount of international content in general but stopped doing so two years ago. We propose that Ofcom should resume measuring the amount of international content – specifically analysing, as an element of this work, the amount of international current affairs. As well as being an explicit obligation in their licences, it is a statutory commitment in the Communications Act (2003), clause 279, that both Channel 3 and Channel 5 provide news and current affairs programmes which deal with international matters. IBT is concerned that the obligation to broadcast a range of international current affairs programmes isn't being adequately met at the present time. From recent research it is clear that there has been a decline in the spend on current affairs programming in general and a significant reduction in the amount of international current affairs programmes.¹ IBT is concerned that because the delivery of this statutory commitment is not being monitored by Ofcom, broadcasters do not feel the same pressure to deliver it as if it were being monitored. We believe it is essential that it is measured if it is to be taken seriously as a public service commitment.

Additionally, in order to ensure delivery of this important PSB obligation, IBT would like to propose that a minimum of 10% per cent of Channel 3's and Channel 5's current affairs programming transmitted in peak qualifies as international. We define 'international' as being *All programming in which the principal themes are explicitly and*

¹ See Background to Channel 3 and Channel 5 Current Affairs provision section below

directly related to a country or countries outside the UK or persons from such countries (whether it was shot in the UK or abroad).

If this obligation were placed on Channel 3 it would result in 3.5 hours of international current affairs being shown in peak per year and for Channel 5 it would result in 1 hour a year. Neither of these commitments seems onerous considering this is a specific and explicit requirement of their licences and the Communications Act.

With regard to other matters raised in the consultation, these do not fall under IBT's area of expertise so we do not submit any comments on these.

Background to Current Affairs on Channel 3 and Channel 5

Channel 3 and Channel 5 play an important role in providing plurality in the PSB current affairs landscape. They provide useful competition to the BBC to ensure that quality is maintained and that programme makers constantly seek to break new creative boundaries.

We agree with Ofcom's statement in its Second PSB Review that their contribution to mass audience content is essential:

The commercially owned networks such as the ITV service and Five play an important role today in delivering popular, entertaining programmes. Their mass reach enables them to invest in original British programmes which are both popular and culturally relevant. That mass reach also gives these networks the ability to play an important role in delivering alternative provision of national and international news and in reaching audiences not necessarily addressed fully by the BBC or Channel 4.

High quality international current affairs programmes are essential to ensure people are well informed about the world around them. This is a service which *facilitates civic understanding and fair and well informed debate on news and current affairs, a comprehensive and authoritative coverage of news and current affairs in, and in the different parts of, the United Kingdom and from around the world. (Communications Act 624(4))*

Current affairs programming is essential because it provides information and context in more detail than is possible in the news. News agendas are dominated by breaking, often negative, stories and it is only through current affairs programming that these stories can be analysed and unpicked, often revealing complexity, humanity and nuance which is not possible in a 3-minute news story.

Channel 3 and Channel 5's current affairs provision is very different from that of any of the other PSB's. Both channels engage audiences who often don't watch current affairs. Their programming is designed to be popular, engaging and accessible. This is its primary value – that it can engage an audience not necessarily interested in the wider world. It is complementary to the other PSB channels in this regard and therefore highly valuable. On Channel 3 *Tonight* is the most watched current affairs programme on UK television with audiences frequently averaging over 3 million compared with, for example, *Dispatches* on Channel 4 which typically attracts half that audience. *Tonight* also

appeals to a different demographic, with an audience which is female dominated, typically in their 30s, 40s and 50s. They do not usually watch current affairs programmes.

Additionally, ITV is now broadcasting *Exposure*.

From recent research it is clear that there has been a decline in the spend on current affairs programming in general and a significant reduction in the amount international current affairs programmes, ieones which tell us about the world outside the UK.

In IBT's recent report, *An Uncertain Future – the Threat to Current Affairs*, it is stated:*Current affairs producers are particularly concerned about the future of two sub-genres: investigations and international stories. They say that foreign-based films are at the back of the pack and there's a real danger that the picture of the world we get from TV is shrinking. Investigations are also under threat because in straitened economic times broadcasters inevitably reduce their exposure to this expensive, labour intensive and risky form of journalism.*²

Ofcom's research shows that *spend on news and current affairs is down by £56m (from £362m in 2006, to £307m in 2011) a reduction of 15%. Taking 2011 alone, hours broadcast in peak time as well as spend both declined, by 3% and 9% respectively. Current affairs alone has borne £29m of this reduction, seeing the collective PSB spend on the genre decrease from £106m in 2006 to £77m in 2011. Overall PSB spend on the genre in peak time is also down, from £66m in 2006 to £49m in 2011 – a reduction of around 24%.*

The vast majority of current affairs programming on Channel 3 and Channel 5 is domestic. One example is that according to IBT's records there has not been an international episode of *Tonight* in the past 12 months. We would like to encourage Channel 3 and Channel 5 to produce more episodes with international content because when they do cover international topics they do it extremely well and attract large audiences. IBT considers this contribution essential for the British public to be engaged in a well-informed debate about what is going on in the world because with this output Channel 3 and Channel 5 reach an audience which is very different from that of other broadcasters.

We need this type of broadcasting because there is evidence that the UK public is concerned about the world outside the UK but at the same time suspicious and wary of it. This potential insularity and resistance to engaging with the wider world is worrying. We cannot afford to be inward-looking as the world becomes increasingly globalised. We will end up isolating ourselves, both culturally and in terms of trade which will have an economic as well as social impact. The commercial PSBs have an important role to play in engaging a mass audience with stories about the wider world in a popular, accessible way. We encourage them to increase their commitment to international current affairs and prioritise this important aspect of their public service remits.

Background: About IBT

² *An Uncertain Future – The Threat to Current Affairs* (IBT 2013)

IBT is a membership-based organisation. The views in this submission reflect the concerns of IBT's member agencies regarding adequate common understanding of the world in which we live. These concerns are shared by millions of UK supporters of these organisations. IBT's members, being intimately and operationally concerned with the effects of 'globalisation' on communities and environments around the world, and with communicating across the world, welcome the advent of the global information society.

IBT's position, reflected in all our policy work since 1997, is that television coverage of the developing world should not just focus on images of suffering which is more often than not what is presented in news coverage. It is IBT's view that an international dimension should be an integral part of all programming.

IBT's current membership includes the following organisations: ActionAid, Age International, Amnesty, Anti-Slavery International, Bond, British Red Cross, Buglife, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Comic Relief, Concern, CRIN, DEC, Doctors of the World, HelpAge International, Human Rights Watch, IDS, International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Int Rescue Committee UK, Islamic Relief, Malaria Consortium, Marie Stopes International, Media Trust, MSF, ONE, Oxfam, PANOS, Plan, Practical Action, Progressio, Raleigh International, Save the Children, Tearfund, Traidcraft Exchange, TVE, UNICEF, VSO, WaterAid, WWF, Y Care International.

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