

The Future of PSB on ITV – Redrawing the regional news map

Foreword

This document is intended to inform the debate surrounding proposals by ITV Plc to change its provision of regional news as part of OfCom's overall review of PSB (Public Service Broadcasting) and its future delivery.

In September 2007, ITV Plc unveiled proposals to change the nature of its regional news provision; a core part of its Channel 3 licences to broadcast in England and Wales.

What follows is intended to be an impartial assessment of these proposals. However, in the interests of fairness, it is important to make clear that the author is an employee of ITV Westcountry, one of ITV Plc's subsidiaries, which will be directly affected by the proposals as they stand.

Amalgamating news provision in the ITV regions (and sub-regions)

The central plank of ITV Plc's proposals to save £35-£40 million on an annual basis is a substantial reduction in the number of regional news programmes it provides across England and Wales. This will be achieved in two ways:

1. Amalgamating sub regions which currently provide a separate service in the form of a 30 minute news magazine programme at 18:00 weekdays.
2. Amalgamating four of the smallest dedicated regions to provide two new services.

Although I wish to deal with each of these proposals in turn, my main focus will be on point 2 for the following reasons.

Although some of the ITV regions, notably ITV Yorkshire, ITV Central, ITV Anglia, ITV Tyne Tees¹ and ITV Meridian provide separate programme services on weekday evenings, it is important to understand that for the rest of the time, news provision is provided for the whole of the licensees' area.

By way of example, whereas during weekdays at 18:00, ITV Meridian provides separate news provision for the South and East of its region, during GMTV opt-outs in the morning, at lunchtime, post News at Ten and at weekends the regional news service is combined across the wider area.

By contrast, ITV Border, ITV Tyne Tees¹, ITV West and ITV Westcountry provide dedicated news services 7 days a week and changes proposed to these services represent a fundamental change in the way each area is served by the licensee.

Footnotes:

1. It is important to note that at present ITV Tyne Tees provides two news services at 18:00 weekdays. As part of ITV Plc's proposals these will be combined and also amalgamated with the stand alone region currently defined as ITV Border.

ITV West & ITV Westcountry

As the main focus of this document relates to plans by ITV Plc (hereafter to be referred to as ‘the company’) to amalgamate four of the smaller ITV regions, I am going to analyse the impact of this using the proposals for ITV West and ITV Westcountry as an example. This is because I am familiar with both these areas, having grown up in the transmission area served by HTV West (now known as ITV West) and as a current employee of ITV Westcountry.

PSB in the regions

Before looking at these proposals in detail, it is useful to reflect on the wholesale changes in PSB provision permitted within ITV regions over recent years. All of the current licensees were awarded Channel 3 licences to broadcast commencing on January 1st 1993 by promising to deliver a set minimum of regional news and non-news programming. The licences were subsequently renewed up to 2014 with new minimum requirements for non-news programming and an ongoing commitment to regional news. The company’s current proposals seek a further change to these licences and indeed in the case of 4 regions, the merger of whole services.

As the company does not control the two licences which cover Scotland or the licences which cover Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands, the regional news provided in these areas is not deemed ‘at risk’ from these proposals. It is therefore important to acknowledge that OfCom and its predecessors, in allowing ITV to acquire the England and Wales licences through successive acquisitions under Carlton Communications and Granada Television, has a responsibility to ensure viewers’ interests in these areas are still served.

If, for example, ITV Plc’s proposals go ahead unchallenged, viewers in the relatively sparsely populated ITV Channel and ITV Grampian transmission areas will still have dedicated regional news services, whereas those in the much larger ITV West and ITV Westcountry transmission areas will not.

Argument for retaining separate news services – ITV West & ITV Westcountry

Regional identity

The ITV regional map of Britain was created according to commercial imperatives in an analogue age. However, with a 50+ year tradition, the viewers served by their 'local ITV company' have identified with these regions and in many cases defined their thinking of where they live by these areas. If for example, you consider ITV Westcountry, its current transmission area is also mirrored by the transmission area of its BBC rival Spotlight and the circulation area of the main regional daily newspaper the 'Western Morning News'. In essence, the region has an established identity, both in terms of media offerings and things like economic backbone, which is vastly different to the transmission area served by ITV West.

For example, in the ITV Westcountry transmission area, tourism and agriculture are still the two biggest industries. By contrast, financial services, aerospace and manufacturing dominate the economic climate in the ITV West transmission area.

In terms of demographics, the ITV Westcountry transmission area is predominantly rural with only one 'large' urban centre – Plymouth - followed by smaller urban centres in Exeter and Torbay. By contrast, ITV West's transmission area is dominated by the urban centre of Bristol with smaller urban centres in Gloucester, Swindon and Bath. This also has a huge bearing on newsworthy subjects like crime. For example, the area covered by the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary is low in crime and has very different crime statistics from the type and number of offences recorded by Avon & Somerset Police.

It is important to acknowledge these key differences because they directly affect the type of stories which are covered by the news operations of ITV West and ITV Westcountry. A merged region would force the news agenda in both areas to change substantially in order to reflect an accurate picture.

Opts

In order to address some of the above issues, ITV Plc has proposed to provide a number of sub-regional opts as part of a new combined larger region. These would take the form of a 3 way split in the regional magazine programme broadcast at 18:00 on weekdays and form the entirety of the regional news roundup at 22:30 on weekdays.

There are a number of problems with this model which I will address below:

1. Division of opts

ITV's revised proposals for the ITV West & ITV Westcountry regions includes two separate opt outs for Cornwall/Plymouth and the rest of the existing ITV Westcountry transmission area plus a third for the existing ITV West transmission area.

In the case of the Cornwall/Plymouth opt, this would separate Devon's largest urban centre from the county in which it sits and also mean relatively newsworthy events in

the Duchy may not get covered because its entire population is roughly the same as the City of Plymouth. While this revised proposal by ITV is driven by the location of transmitters, it provides the first of many examples where ITV appears to have put forward a set of proposals which are not properly thought out or considered.

Further to this, the company has already discussed with staff how these opt outs will be filled. While representations have been made to OfCom about 'stand alone' news bulletins, the company has already indicated that a given news report or story may feature in more than one opt – in other words, there will be an element of duplication, rather defeating the purpose of an opt out in the first place.

2. News provision across the day

At present the company is proposing to broadcast regional news in the ITV West & ITV Westcountry transmission areas in the following way:

GMTV:	Pan regional bulletins from Gloucestershire to the Isles of Scilly
Lunch news:	Pan regional bulletins from Gloucestershire to the Isles of Scilly
18:00:	Pan regional news magazine programme with 3 opt outs as outlined previously (2 pre-recorded)
22:30:	3 opt outs as outlined previously (2 pre-recorded)
Weekends:	Pan regional bulletins from Gloucestershire to the Isles of Scilly

The main problem with this model is that viewers in respective areas will have no continuity in news provision. This is particularly relevant for breaking or developing stories which, depending on where viewers live, may or may not be covered in the bulletin they are watching. For example, a viewer in Bristol watching the 22:30 news will see just stories from the existing ITV West region, but at weekends, lunchtime and during GMTV opt outs, see stories from the far west of England. The same of course is true in reverse for viewers within the existing ITV Westcountry transmission area.

3. Pre-recorded opt outs

In order to facilitate the transmission of separate opt outs in the 18:00 regional news programme and the 22:30 post News at Ten bulletin, the company is proposing to pre-record 2 of the 3 opt outs. In the case of the 22:30 bulletin, this process is likely to have to start by 21:00 at the latest to allow sufficient gallery time for its completion. This directly affects editorial judgment and means that late breaking news will not be covered at the detriment to the overall news offering. The nature of the 'opt outs' as proposed mean that if you live in Plymouth for example, you will receive no news at 22:30 from the rest of Devon!

4. Costing

When you take into account the cost of providing 3 separate opt outs, it is imperative that one begins to question the overall rationale behind the proposal for merging the regions into one. The existing news belts of the regional news programmes provided by ITV West and ITV Westcountry run 12 to 15 minutes in duration, the time still required from these dedicated areas to fill the opts in the 22:30 bulletin. If the

company – as it claims – is committed to providing this level of news provision, this could still be provided under slimmed down regions which retain their existing identities while still reducing the costs of the overall service in line with ITV's budgetary objectives.

Sport

Sport provision in the ITV regions has reduced substantially in recent months. Until recently, every ITV region provided a dedicated football programme and has an ongoing requirement to feature sports as part of its news offerings.

Under the revised proposals, sports coverage in the existing ITV Westcountry transmission area would be substantially curtailed to meet the needs of an enlarged region. At present, ITV Westcountry reflects all of its league football teams, a number of non-league sides, and rugby, which has a particularly strong following in Cornwall, plus other activities like cross country running, gymnastics and bowls. It has already been stated that if the regions of ITV West and ITV Westcountry are combined into one, Plymouth Argyle would be the only side still to feature alongside the bigger league football and rugby sides in the existing ITV West transmission area. In essence, 'regional' coverage of sport will disappear almost completely in the 'super region'.

Features & Weather

In contrast to the core news and sports services, there is an argument for providing more 'joined up thinking' between regions on features and weather. The South West peninsular has a clearly defined geography which is easy to reflect in a weather forecast which covers both existing transmission areas. In a similar way, it may also be possible to run some well produced features across regions where editorially this is deemed acceptable. This is a further demonstration of how costs can be reduced by lateral thinking without compromising the overall core news operation

Public perception

When ITV Plc announced its proposals in September 2007, they generated a widespread adverse reaction. The company has since commissioned its own market research which shows substantial opposition to the proposals, particularly within rural areas. This is particularly prevalent in the ITV Westcountry transmission area where the region is currently served by four opt outs covering Cornwall, Plymouth & South Devon, North Devon and East Devon/South Somerset/West Dorset. The company's proposals will replace the most genuinely local news provided by an ITV region in Britain with the most geographically remote overnight, stretching 200 miles from Gloucestershire to the Isles of Scilly.

The Commercial Realities of the Post-Analogue Era

ITV Plc's proposals for changes in regional news are being made at a time of great change in the broadcasting landscape. It cannot be disputed that the commercial realities of today's television market are very different to 15 years ago when the company's individual licenses were awarded. It may be the case that ITV should be

helped with public money to offset the cost of providing regional news in a digital age but my concern about the current proposals is that the company has not allowed that debate to happen before drawing its own conclusions.

This debate is all part of OfCom's second review of PSB, but in making its plans public prior to its conclusion, the company is in danger of trying to skew debate. It must be noted that the company has preceded OfCom's findings on regional news by already changing the management structure in its ITV West / ITV Westcountry and ITV Border / ITV Tyne Tees regional news operations to meet its stated aim of merging these regions as if the outcome was a foregone conclusion.

Summary

ITV is a commercial organisation which is as responsible to its shareholders as any other public company. However, the nature of its business is unique, evolving from a highly regulated environment into a market place with multiple media outlets and ever growing competition for advertising revenue. It is also, as a consequence of its history, responsible for something which the viewers of this country hold dear – regional news.

This document does not seek to suggest that ITV Plc be required to continue with its existing PSB obligations without revision and recognises that the current funding model for PSB on ITV is not sustainable. However, the provision of regional news is so important to viewers its future cannot be decided on the basis of arbitrary commercial imperatives alone. ITV's current proposals do just that, talking about 'critical audience mass' rather than recognising the significant differences between the regions it wants to merge.

The company seems ideologically wedded to the idea of abolishing regions even though alternative models have already been costed which enable ITV to make the savings it requires without abolishing whole regions. The status quo may not be sustainable in a digital world. If it is, then public money may be required to fund it.

In future, regions which provide multiple services either in their entirety at 18:00 weekdays or as opt outs within these programmes may have to be single services. In the existing regions which do this, eg, ITV Meridian, viewers still have a sense of their wider region because breakfast, lunch, late news and weekend output reflects the greater region already as it has done since ITV began in the 1950's. What is currently proposed for the transmission areas served by ITV Border, ITV Tyne Tees, ITV West and ITV Westcountry is quite different and as the company's own research has shown, without public mandate.

OfCom has provided concession after concession to ITV over the years. It has allowed the company to all but abolish non-news regional programming and close down regional production centres across the UK. It now wants to take this a step further by completely re-drawing the regional news map and replacing live news with pre-recorded offerings at the same time as diluting the only real competition to the BBC's own regional services. Regional news on ITV1 is the company's last important public service obligation. Its future should be decided with the public in mind.