

Rhona Parry
PSB Review
Ofcom
Riverside House
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Dear Rhona Parry

Re: Second Public Service Broadcasting Review Phase 2

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) is the lead development agency for the arts. Our mission is to place arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life.

The Council places high value on the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) core purposes as stated within the Communications Act 2003, and in particular, the remit that cultural activity across the UK is reflected in PSB content. This is particularly important in Northern Ireland both in terms of public awareness of the arts and engagement in the arts.

ACNI values the opportunity to make this response to phase 2 of Ofcom's review. We wish to reiterate some of the issues we raised in phase 1 as well as address specific issues on nations and regions which Ofcom has highlighted following analysis of previous responses received.

Current PSB provision:

Current PSB provision has not served the arts well in an increasingly fragmented media market. Economic pressures have pushed specialized factual arts programming almost out of sight in favour of popular shows with arts content such as 'Strictly Come Dancing'.

Ofcom has clearly articulated its objective within the review to ascertain the best model and platform for future PSB provision. However the issue of PSB content and the arts deficit within it, is a priority which the Arts Council of Northern Ireland feels strongly that Ofcom should also recognize.

Ofcom has identified news and current affairs as well as children's content as key areas of deficit which need to be addressed within PSB provision. The Council would like to make the point again that arts and culture are also clear deficits within current content provision and this needs to be addressed urgently. In fact arts and culture form integral parts of the content required to address the deficits in news and children's programming but which currently, rarely register within mainstream programming, particularly local news and current affairs.

Indeed ACNI wishes to highlight its view that Ofcom should include a re evaluation of PSB content as soon as practical in order to ensure that the remit of the Communications Act 2003 is met by PSB providers now and in the future, that is:

“that cultural activity in the United Kingdom, and its diversity, are reflected, supported and stimulated by the representation in those services (taken together) of drama, comedy and music, by the inclusion of feature films in those services and by the treatment of other visual and performing arts;” Clause 264, 6(b) Communications Act 2003.

PSB provision within the nations and regions:

The current model of PSB provision has demonstrated a clear deficit in arts based content in NI. It is crucial that any future PSB model evaluates against clear criteria, the public service content that future PSB providers are obliged to deliver. This is necessary to more accurately reflect the cultures of nations and regions, and in particular, to creatively present the rich artistic talent that Northern Ireland nurtures.

BBC is the cornerstone of PSB provision to date and much of its programming is highly valued by ACNI. However, in common with other PSB providers, BBC NI has demonstrated a significant shortfall in arts content within its programming.

Locally-originated output is fundamental to the delivery of PSB purposes here in NI and recent announcements by BBC to increase the budget for programming within the nations and regions is welcomed by the Council. Following a valuable discussion between ACNI and BBC NI on arts content in local programme making, there remain significant challenges to delivering on one of BBC's core PSB purposes, “to stimulate creativity and cultural excellence”.

ACNI has noted the uncertain future of PSB content provided by UTV, a subsidiary of the ITV1 network. It is clear that ITV1's incentives are no longer credibly aligned with public service purposes and commercial priorities take precedence within that network of broadcasters, with ensuing pressures on UTV.

Council shares the concerns of members of the NI Assembly and the Culture Arts and Leisure Committee at the potential loss of a second local broadcasting

platform and the plurality in news and local programming that UTV provides to BBC NI. However, UTV's limited arts content is now under further threat as the broadcaster prepares to cut back on weekly local news and non-news output.

In summary, it is the view of ACNI that coverage of the arts in NI is currently under-represented in national output by both BBC NI and ITV1's subsidiary UTV. Three-quarters of the adult population in NI and 93% of young people attend or participate in arts and cultural events. Yet public service broadcasters such as BBC NI rarely include the arts in its mainstream programming – unlike sports.

A solution is regular inclusion of the arts in mainstream news and current affairs programming on both radio and television by BBC and any other PSB provider. Another is to invest and prioritise more specialised factual programming that reflects NI society and in particular, the rich contribution made to it by artists and arts organizations.

Again, ACNI wishes to emphasise the need for coverage of the arts in mainstream output as a means of recognising the value of the arts and arts activities as an intrinsic part of the life and culture of any society.

On another note, and relevant to nations and regions, ACNI wishes to support the call to establish ongoing mainstream public funding for PSC in indigenous languages. ACNI supports the need to have a secure funding platform for Irish and Ulster Scots programming content within PSB provision within NI.

Finally, it is imperative to state then, that the people of Northern Ireland are as entitled to have equitable access through quality PSB content to our artistic and cultural assets as the citizens of London have to theirs.

Preferred PSB model:

ACNI feels that no single model fits perfectly the requirements for PSB provision and content in Northern Ireland, but given the choice of three outlined by Ofcom, the preferred option is Model 2: a refined BBC/Channel 4 model.

ACNI would like to see the PSB purposes and content of both BBC and C4 strengthened in the future in order that both broadcasters develop working partnerships with the arts and cultural sectors in NI and consequently improve the PSB remit to represent diverse cultural activity. Model 2 may provide the platform to do this and recent announcements by both providers to engage in greater programming within nations and regions is welcomed and is likely to benefit NI.

In addition, Model 2 allows the door to be left open for competition from independent production companies to develop PSC which brings new energy to creative industries and boosts imaginative arts content within PSB programming. It too may help build stronger relationships between the independent production sector and arts organisations in NI.

This model does offer scope for plurality with potential new funding for nations and regions and local news, which could benefit channel 3 licensees such as UTV.

In addition, ACNI would also like to make the case that RTE as an alternative broadcaster, and one which significantly funds arts content on the island of Ireland and adds to plurality, should continue to be made available post-digital switchover within NI.

Funding:

ACNI does not wish to make comment on potential sources of funding for PSB at this stage. We do however wish to make the case against using National Lottery funding for public service content provision post 2012 as a suggested means of providing direct public funding to address financial shortfalls.

This potential option is likely to directly and adversely affect the revenue used by Lottery good causes and in particular, is of grave concern to the Arts Council as a lottery funding distributor and to those many arts organisations which rely on lottery funding for survival.

The architecture of Public Service Content – new and emerging media:

ACNI understands that the traditional PSB model must expand to include new media, digital and interactive technologies, in order to ensure that PSB purposes survive beyond linear TV and radio platforms.

Online platforms add new dimensions to arts and cultural content and the latter are already the building blocks for younger generations who expect to build their own cultural content, unique identities and publish it online.

In agreement with our sister organization Arts Council England (ACE), ACNI believes that public intervention to ensure availability and access to content that the market would not otherwise provide will continue to be necessary for public service content in the digital age. Content which supports arts and culture should be promoted and balance sought between this and the commercial objectives of publishers and broadcasters.

ACNI looks forward to working with ACE in 2009 to look at how arts and culture content may evolve within new media platforms and among new media providers. There is potential for the cultural non departmental public bodies to work together to develop the concept of arts and culture organisations becoming more involved in directly publishing public service content (eg the Tate Gallery's in-house production) or working in partnership with PSB providers to produce innovative arts and cultural content.

Summary:

ACNI would welcome Ofcom's recognition of our views in its final paper in 2009, in particular, the need to address the shortfall or deficit in arts and cultural content, alongside deficits in local news and children's programming, within current PSB provision within NI.

In particular, ACNI would welcome any proposal from Ofcom to review and re evaluate PSB purposes and remits for public service content to ensure that arts and cultural content receives the protection it deserves as an integral element of modern life, reflecting society and NI/UK culture.

This submission completes ACNI's response to phase 2 of the PSB Review. This response is available for publication to Ofcom's website.

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