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## **Review of BBC news and current affairs**

Terms of reference

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**TERMS OF REFERENCE:**

Publication Date: 5 March 2019

# 1. Terms of reference

## We are conducting a review of the BBC's news and current affairs output across television, radio and online

- 1.1 The way we consume and engage with news is changing. The traditional mix of television and radio bulletins – giving audiences an authoritative daily summary of major events – has been replaced for many people by a far more complex news environment, in which a broad range of online sources deliver and seek to interpret news stories throughout the day.
- 1.2 In this climate, the role of the BBC as an impartial provider of news and current affairs across all its platforms is more important than ever. The challenge for the BBC is to remain a relevant and trusted source of news, which delivers high quality content for all audiences and listeners. Our review will look at how BBC News operates within this climate, with the aim of understanding how well the BBC is adapting to meet that challenge.
- 1.3 This review forms one part of our ongoing regulatory scrutiny of the BBC's news and current affairs provision, and should be considered as part of the wider portfolio of work we undertake in this area. The findings from this review will inform our next annual assessment of the BBC's performance, which will be published in autumn 2019.

### The BBC's role in relation to news

- 1.4 The BBC's Charter sets out the Corporation's Mission – to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain – and its Public Purposes.
- 1.5 The first Public Purpose requires the BBC **“to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them”**. The Charter goes on to describe how the BBC should fulfil this Public Purpose:

*“the BBC should provide duly accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming to build people's understanding of all parts of the United Kingdom and of the wider world. Its content should be provided to the highest editorial standards. It should offer a range and depth of analysis and content not widely available from other United Kingdom news providers, using the highest calibre presenters and journalists, and championing freedom of expression, so that all audiences can engage fully with major local, regional, national, United Kingdom and global issues and participate in the democratic process, at all levels, as active and informed citizens.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Article 6(1) of the [BBC Charter](#).

- 1.6 Distinctiveness lies at the core of the BBC Charter and Agreement. The BBC is expected to provide high-quality, creative content that is distinctive across all its output and services;<sup>2</sup> and that includes news and current affairs across all platforms. In other words, the BBC should be making programmes and services that – taken as a whole – are substantially different from comparable broadcasters and providers.<sup>3</sup>

## Why we are undertaking the current review

- 1.7 Ofcom’s job is to regulate the BBC to ensure it fulfils its Mission and Public Purposes on behalf of UK audiences. One way we do this is through in-depth reviews “addressing any specific issue of concern” we identify.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.8 Our Operating Licence sets out the requirements that the BBC must meet to deliver the first Public Purpose. We expect it to:

- a) *“provide a significant level of news, current affairs and factual programmes across its full range of services and platforms, and seek to reach and serve all audiences with this output;*
- b) *seek to maintain its coverage of regional, national and international themes and stories within its news, current affairs and factual programmes, to enable audiences to develop a broad understanding of what is happening locally, nationally and in the wider world;*
- c) *continue to provide trusted and reliable information, news, current affairs and factual output to the highest editorial standards;*
- d) *ensure that it provides adequate links to third-party online material, particularly within its news stories, helping to provide its users with a wealth of information while also supporting other providers within the industry. In doing so, the BBC should exercise careful judgment about the links it offers.”<sup>5</sup>*

- 1.9 We will review the licence conditions through the Charter period and will amend them depending on how the BBC performs.
- 1.10 In our first annual report on the BBC, in October 2018, we concluded that the BBC was performing well in many respects against the first Public Purpose. When we asked audiences to rate different aspects of the BBC’s news and current affairs, more than eight in ten told us they valued the BBC’s investigative journalism and analysis of events. More than seven in ten told us they regarded BBC news highly for the quality, accuracy and trustworthiness of its news content.
- 1.11 However, there were some areas of concern. Audiences rated the BBC lower for its depth of analysis, and for providing a range of content not widely available elsewhere, than for many other aspects. Audiences are less likely to rate BBC TV news highly for helping them

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<sup>2</sup> Article 6(3) of the [BBC Charter](#).

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 1 of Schedule 2 to the [Agreement](#).

<sup>4</sup> Article 51(3) of the [BBC Charter](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Operating Licence for the BBC’s UK Public Services](#), paragraph 1:24:1-4

make up their mind, compared to those who considered this news to be high quality, and previous research shows a similar trend.

- 1.12 In our annual report, we also considered the BBC’s particular responsibility – set out by the Charter – to help people participate in the democratic process. Our research has revealed many people are generally concerned about both the reliability of content in an era of ‘fake news’, and the negative consequences of disinformation for public trust and democratic processes.<sup>6</sup> Nearly a third (29%) of adult internet users express concerns about disinformation online.<sup>7</sup>
- 1.13 The BBC has a central role to play in providing trusted, impartial news. Yet our research has shown that audiences consistently rate the impartiality of the BBC’s TV and radio news less highly than many other aspects of BBC’s news output.<sup>8</sup>
- 1.14 For these reasons we consider it is appropriate to undertake a review, to examine in detail the BBC’s delivery of the first Public Purpose.

## The focus of our review

- 1.15 This review aims to understand how different audiences engage with BBC news and current affairs, and the role it plays in their broader news consumption and in the news environment more broadly. We will ask audiences their views on the BBC’s news and current affairs provision across TV, radio and online. We intend to focus on the following areas:
- i) **Relevance:** We will examine how effective the BBC is at serving all audiences, including those who typically engage with it less – and the reasons for that. We will look at the role the BBC plays in helping people understand the world around them, and how they engage with its content. We will also consider how well the BBC is placed to continue serving audiences in the future, with a changing news landscape.
  - ii) **Distinctiveness and quality:** We will explore audience views on how the BBC reports complex and challenging stories while maintaining the quality that audiences value. We will look at the range and depth of analysis in its news and current affairs, across all platforms, and how this compares with other UK news providers.
  - iii) **Trust:** We will assess how people’s views on the accuracy and impartiality of the BBC drive their trust in it. This review will not assess the BBC’s formal compliance with the ‘due impartiality’<sup>9</sup> and ‘due accuracy’ requirements of the Ofcom

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<sup>6</sup> Ofcom [The Changing World of News](#): Qualitative Research, p.48-56.

<sup>7</sup> Ofcom/ICO [Internet users’ experience of harm online: summary of survey research](#), p.8.

<sup>8</sup> Ofcom, [News Consumption in the UK: 2018](#), p.91-95.

<sup>9</sup> We set out in the Broadcasting Code that “due” is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality. Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. “Due” means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the

Broadcasting Code. Since we took on our current duties in April 2017, we have not found the BBC to be in breach of the 'due impartiality' requirements of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code. However, our research suggests people rate the impartiality of BBC news lower than its accuracy or quality.<sup>10</sup> We will seek to understand more clearly the importance the audience places on the BBC's impartiality; whether they are satisfied that the current tools used to ensure due impartiality are effective; and how audience attitudes to impartiality, accuracy and trust relate to one another.

## How we will conduct our review

- 1.16 In order to understand how well the BBC is adapting to the changing news environment we will carry out research to map the role of its online news provision. As part of our review, we will examine the wider context within which BBC news online operates, and how the BBC differentiates its content from that of other providers, including newspapers.
- 1.17 We will use a variety of research and analytic techniques to understand how different stories covered by the BBC online – from reporting of major news events to celebrity and entertainment news – are accessed by users. We will look at people's 'news journey' – how, and how easily, they navigate within the BBC's news website, and between it and other news sites. We will consider how the BBC works with other news providers when sourcing or attributing their stories online.<sup>11</sup> We will also look at whether people who use BBC online believe it has a distinctive format, mix of content, and depth of information.
- 1.18 We will commission a range of new and in-depth audience research, using a variety of methodologies, to draw a comprehensive picture of what UK audiences and users want from the BBC. This will help explain how, and why, people access BBC television, radio and online content.
- 1.19 This work will include qualitative research with different audience groups across the UK's nations and regions. We will speak to those who engage regularly with the BBC, and those who do not. We will explore the reasons behind this, to understand whether the BBC could do more for those audiences it finds harder to reach, including young people.
- 1.20 We will consider the BBC's delivery of news across a range of national and international stories, and use this research to establish whether people feel well informed and why.
- 1.21 We will ask audiences about news content, from the BBC and other providers, in order to identify the characteristics which help deepen their understanding of an issue. We will ask

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programme. So "due impartiality" does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented.

<sup>10</sup> [Ofcom's annual report on the BBC](#), p.25; Ofcom, [News consumption in the UK: 2018 report](#), p.91.

<sup>11</sup> The [Operating Licence](#) requires the BBC to "ensure that it provides adequate links to third party online material, particularly within its news stories, helping to provide its users with a wealth of information while also supporting other providers within the industry. In doing so the BBC should exercise careful judgment about the links it offers and 'ensure that it [BBC online] provides adequate links to material provided by third parties.'"

them about their assessment of the quality of the BBC's current affairs programmes, and the depth of analysis, including in the area of investigative journalism.

- 1.22 Ofcom already has a detailed research database on people's news consumption habits. We will use our existing and ongoing research to analyse audiences' attitudes to the BBC's news provision, comparing it to other news providers. This will help us understand how audiences perceive BBC news in areas such as impartiality, accuracy and trustworthiness. We will also explore if attitudes to issues such as trust differ significantly between different groups.
- 1.23 In previous research, people have raised concerns about potential BBC bias on both sides of the political spectrum.<sup>12</sup> This has been reflected in the complaints we have received: during our first full year regulating the BBC, the most common type of complaint about its content related to impartiality.<sup>13</sup> We will explore the reasons behind this, and examine how audiences perceive the techniques the BBC uses to achieve due impartiality in its programmes.
- 1.24 As well as speaking to audiences, we will engage with industry and other interested parties. Our findings, which we expect to publish in autumn 2019, will inform our ongoing regulation of the BBC.

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<sup>12</sup> Ofcom [The Changing World of News](#): Qualitative Research, p.47.

<sup>13</sup> [Ofcom's annual report on the BBC](#), p 48