

Submission to: Phase 2 Ofcom PSB Review

by
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It is abundantly clear from time spent with media professionals and academics in my international work for the CBA [Commonwealth Broadcasting Association] that the UK's system of PSB remains a model that is both envied and copied throughout the world. Ofcom and the UK Government should therefore be aware that the impact of any evolution of the UK PSB system will inevitably have significant repercussions not only in the UK but by influencing the future shape of PSB globally.

Digitalisation, consolidation and the increasing commercialisation of broadcast media world-wide means that PSB must evolve and change but evidence from my work for CBA, as Project Director of the CBA-DFID Broadcast Media Scheme and as course convenor for the Masters Degree in Media and International Development at UEA, Norwich, highlights the importance of public purpose remaining as a core element of the UK broadcasting and media industry.

As a citizen I value all the core values of PSB but my professional experience relates widely and specifically to the role of international coverage and it is therefore as an internationalist that I make this submission.

In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world all citizens have a fundamental right to information that enables them to make sense of the world. Media Research [Ofcom, DFID, IBT/CBA] continues to demonstrate that television provides a vital source of information about the wider-world for UK citizens and that members of the UK public regard *"Informing our understanding of the world"* as a key public service broadcasting purpose. In this light it seems surprising that international coverage and the threats to it are not given specific focus in the Executive Summary of "Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review So Far...."

Although identified as a key purpose of PSB by the public, broadcasters continue to perceive that international coverage delivers low audience ratings and is therefore 'high risk' and expensive programming that they are less likely to commission.

Ofcom's Phase 2 consultation document established that there is widespread public support for PSB plurality in the UK. While the BBC has an unrivalled international network of correspondents and a new core remit to 'Bring the World to the UK', Channel 4 undeniably makes a significant contribution to international coverage in the UK both via Channel 4 News and in programme strands such as 'Unreported World' and 'Dispatches' alongside the More 4 documentary strand

'True Stories'. In fact the Executive Summary of "Ofcom's PSB Review so far...", states that "There are compelling arguments and strong audience support for alternative public service provision to complement the BBC. However, some respondents argued we had overstated the importance of this. To investigate, we reviewed new viewing data showing that competition in public service provision enhances rather than reduces impact, opening up genres to audiences who tend not to watch similar content on the BBC".

An example of the efficacy of media plurality may well be that shortly after the BBC's international documentary strand 'Storyville' was under threat, More 4 launched 'True Stories'.

It is right and accepted that the BBC remains funded as the cornerstone of UK PSB but if, as it would seem, plurality is both desired and widely accepted, then an analysis of the UK broadcast media landscape would identify Channel 4 as the broadcaster that currently delivers many aspects of public service purpose to UK audiences alongside and in a complimentary fashion to the central PSB output of the BBC.

In terms of audience awareness, research continues to highlight the critical importance of children's programming in forming an understanding of the wider-world. With the continued and growing dominance of U.S. originated children's programming, consumer groups in the UK express fears that this cultural homogeneity could 'impair the development of children in the UK, both culturally and socially and limit their understanding of the world around them" [Scott. M., 'Screening the World', IBT. 2008].

In 2007 46% of new international programming on UK terrestrial channels was originated in and represented the U.S. and with digital fragmentation that figure is likely to increase with 79% of international children's programming delivering a U.S. world perspective on digital channels in 2007 [Scott, M. Screening the World IBT. 2008].

It has already been established [the LEK Report] and recognised [by Ofcom] that Channel 4 faces a significant funding gap [£100-150 million p.a.] and with the current economic situation, increasingly fragmented digital broadcasting environment and advertising downturn, this gap can only be expected to widen. At current funding levels it would be difficult to imagine Channel 4 being able to maintain its current programming levels in international programming, let alone being able to originate new international coverage and develop new programming for children and young audiences as proposed in *Next on 4*.

In order to maintain and build on current levels of international coverage and children's programming in the UK, I welcome the recognition by Ofcom/the UK government of the urgent need to establish a new PSB settlement early in 2009.

I strongly believe that Channel 4 should continue to be supported as a core part of that settlement. And that Channel 4 should remain in public ownership with a remit to focus on the delivery of public purposes. The perceived poor commercial reputation of international coverage would mean that this element of Channel 4's output would undoubtedly be one of the first genres to suffer if Channel 4 were to be privatised.

Additionally, I would highlight the current tendency is for broadcasters to categorise programming that contains an international element as 'international'. In practice this often means that such programme proposals are ghettoised in specifically international slots and strands and excluded from commission as part of a mixed and diverse schedule. Labelling programming in this way may in itself preclude audience engagement.

As audiences increasingly live globally interconnected lives it might be suggested that they are one step ahead of broadcasters in terms of international coverage and that programmes about the wider world should no longer be defined and scheduled as 'domestic' or 'international'. Audience understanding of global issues is also likely to be furthered and deepened by programmes that contextualise the news by reflecting more accurately the lives that we all now lead with more diverse international drama and entertainment programmes.

Whichever funding option is to be agreed then it must be sustainable and able to provide stability to the UK system of PSB as a whole. If this issue is resolved sooner rather than later then certainty may well lead to new creative originations of international coverage from both the BBC and Channel 4 alongside other significant public purpose benefits.

The UK has a system of broadcasting that is historically significant in global terms and one that is to be treasured in cultural terms. Acting swiftly and promptly to preserve and stabilise the integrity of the system is now a necessity.

Sally-Ann Wilson