

Steven Cape
Ofcom
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19 May 2015

Dear Mr Cape

MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK FOR MEDIA PLURALITY

I am writing to you in response to Ofcom's consultation on the measurement framework for media plurality in order to clarify a number of issues relating to news on commercial radio.

RadioCentre has most recently commented on plurality issues in response to calls for evidence from both DCMS¹ and the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications² in 2013. There continues to be support in commercial radio for guaranteeing sufficient plurality in the media to help ensure a diverse range of independent media voices, high consumption across a demographic spread and, most importantly, to give consumers a choice of different news sources.

The current legal framework was developed with this in mind, with successive Ministers emphasising the need to ensure that no single person or organisation controls too much of the media leading to excessive power to influence opinions and set the political agenda. We understand the Government's continued desire to examine the extent to which plurality across media can best be measured consistently and objectively, as well as the need for Ofcom to develop a framework for analysis.

The Communications Act 2003 and Enterprise Act 2002 give Ofcom a duty to advise and report to the Secretary of State on this matter. It is appropriate that plurality of *news* is at the heart of this framework, and therefore Ofcom's definitions of news must be as accurate as possible. In this context, I am writing to you to ensure that Ofcom is fully informed about the type of news content available on commercial radio, as there appears to be some misunderstanding regarding the methods of newsgathering and editorial control.

The consultation states that 'Sky News Radio produces bulletins for the majority of the UK's commercial radio stations'³. While this statement is true, it is not fully representative of how news is delivered on commercial radio, as it does not fully reflect the editorial role that stations have. RadioCentre has highlighted this discrepancy to Ofcom previously⁴ and would like to take this opportunity to clarify the detailed arrangements still further.

¹ RadioCentre, '[Response to DCMS Consultation on Media Ownership and Plurality](#)', October 2013.

² RadioCentre, '[Written Evidence to the House Of Lords Select Committee on Communications Call for Evidence: Media Plurality](#)', May 2013.

³ Ofcom, '[Measurement framework for media plurality](#)', 11 March 2015, p. 24.

⁴ First mentioned in: RadioCentre, Letter to Ben Clarke, '[Ofcom Advice on Measuring Plurality Across Media](#)', 18 November 2011.

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As the consultation highlights, Sky News (through its contract with IRN) does supply news content to the majority of commercial radio stations in the UK. It does this mainly through a wire service, as well as pre-written scripts and edited audio. However, IRN is not alone in offering this service, and does so alongside others such as Radio News Hub (which offers an independent alternative to IRN to English speaking stations internationally), the Press Association and the Global Traffic Network (GTN) which provides entertainment news as well as travel updates.

Ofcom's analysis of the news available on commercial radio does not appear to acknowledge the different sources available and fails to consider the different tones and styles of delivery which exists on different station genres and in different broadcast areas. Crucially it also fails to recognise that most news output is sourced, produced and edited by editorial teams, journalists and presenters based at the stations.

In addition, those commercial radio stations that are wholly or mainly speech based – such as LBC broadcasting nationally and CityTalk in Liverpool – do not use IRN in the majority of editorial. LBC is now a central part of the Global Newsroom; which generates the majority of its own news content, and then makes this available to Global's 20 newsrooms across the UK. At regional stations, such as Orion's Free Radio, IRN audio is only used at off-peak times or when there has been an issue of national significance.

Every recognised brand in commercial radio will have a desk editor charged with re-writing and re-recording news from the IRN wire. This provides further levels of editorial and analysis that are not accounted for in Ofcom's current considerations. As a result, industry estimations are that more than 95% of the radio news scripts received from IRN are re-written by local editorial teams.

In summary, contrary to the claim in the consultation, commercial radio services use IRN services as part of a range of news sources. In the vast majority of stations, IRN is not used for the broadcast ready-made scripts and audio services it offers, but for facts and figures to support independent editorial. While the degree to which stations use IRN services varies depending on their size and content commitments, it is misleading to imply that commercial radio simply receives and re-broadcasts news content from Sky/ IRN.

I think that Ofcom and Government have taken the correct approach by constructing a framework which assesses plurality according to the influence, reach and time spent with sources of news and current affairs content, rather than some broader definition of cultural or non-news content. However, when providing advice on media plurality I ask that the Ofcom framework takes into account the unique nature and impact of news on commercial radio.

If Ofcom would like more information on how commercial radio news is delivered, I have been informed by several RadioCentre members that they would be willing go through this in more detail. I would therefore be happy to facilitate a meeting or visit to a commercial radio newsroom should you find it beneficial.

Yours sincerely



Siobhan Kenny
Chief Executive, RadioCentre

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