

ANDREW GEORGE MP

Rhona Parry
PSB Review
Ofcom
Riverside House
2A Southwark Bridge Road
London, SE1 9HA

Date: 19th June 2008

Our ref: 08/27.1/ag/td

Dear Rhona,

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

In order to meet the formal deadline for the consultation I write to set out the basis of my deep concern about the probable impact of proposed public service broadcasting changes upon the idiosyncratic and probably not completely commercially viable need to reflect upon current affairs, news, documentary and community reporting at a sub national geographic level which is relevant to the communities served.

The background to my concern, which is shared by a number of my parliamentary colleagues, is that the superficial attraction of illusory “choice” represented by the development of multiple channels and the claimed “benefits” of the analogue switch-off in favour of digital technology which is being rolled out on an either bemused or credulous public in an almost entirely uncritical political environment is actually likely to offer less genuine choice, a “race to the bottom” and an emphasis on game shows, make overs and celebrity tittle-tattle as quality documentary, imaginative journalism and localised news reporting is quietly ditched.

Ofcom has a very important – indeed, vital, - role to play in finding a robust methodology to avoid this kind of scenario. I hope that we will have the opportunity when my parliamentary colleagues and I meet Lynette Huntley on 8th July to explore in greater detail the concerns I briefly summarise below to meet your formal deadline.

The debate about national news and current affairs reporting concerns me particularly if the BBC is effectively left to operate in this arena without any credible competitor. But the serious issue I would like to discuss in more detail with you is the need to protect a credible alternative to the BBC in the vitally important arena of local news and current affairs reporting.

I should first of all make clear that I do not, at this stage, necessarily believe that any existing provider or franchise holder should have an automatic divine right to be the lead “local” news and comment affairs programming provider if they appear to have no desire or ambition to seriously take on such a role.

Secondly, for the avoidance of doubt I should clarify that the kind of geographic area covered by the “government zones” as designed by central government are not necessarily tantamount to “regions” which for the purposes of sub national broadcasting would need to at least reflect a reasonable collation of local identity and community of interest. For example the government zone of the South West is so large that news about Bristol, Stroud, Bournemouth and Gloucester are no more relevant nor significant to my constituents in West Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly than if

they were to be receiving national news coverage with stories about Bolton, Sunderland, Bangor or Glasgow.

Hence terms such as “regional” and “sub-regional” would need to be clearly defined for this purpose prior to the engagement in any meaningful debate. Therefore may I propose that at our meeting we find time to explore some of the following issues summarised below:

- The importance of “local/sub-regional” news/current affairs programmes for maintaining a healthy, well informed democracy – currently maintained by PSB obligations in franchise agreements.
- The “risk” to PSB broadcasting as commercial analogue broadcasters seek to reduce PSB commitments to save money driven by the need to compete post digital switchover with channels which don’t have PSB obligations.
- The assessment made by Ofcom in respect of channels fulfilling their PSB obligations.
- It is strongly suggested that ITV has already reduced its PSB obligation. What efforts have been made by Ofcom to monitor and oblige PS broadcasters to satisfy their commitments?
- We note the recent closure of the ITV Westcountry current affairs department despite an obligation to produce 22.5 hours of current affairs programming in addition to news. This appears to have been replaced with 10 hours of late night politics and lightweight consumer shows produced in Bristol for both ITV West and Westcountry.
- It is suggested that ITV has already effectively begun the merger of its West and Westcountry regions by interviewing for a new head of the combined region. This is happening before Ofcom have even approved the move. We would like to know how Ofcom views this kind of development.
- What concrete commitments can be enshrined and upheld in a future contract which could not be watered down or simply not met simply through short notice editorial judgements not open to public consultation or further reference to Ofcom for approval?
- Has Ofcom considered the possibility of creating a “regional” public service broadcasting license for a provider who can give a demonstrable and measurable commitment to properly provide a guaranteed minimum of coverage, hours, prime-time and quality of broadcast?

My colleagues and I very much look forward to meeting Lynette Huntley on 8th to discuss these matters further.

With good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew George MP

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Matthew Taylor MP
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Julia Goldsworthy MP
Nick Harvey MP
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Lynette Huntley, Ofcom

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