

Name and title under which you would like this response to appear:

Paul McLaughlin National Broadcasting Organiser

Representing:

National Union of Journalists

What are your comments on these proposals?:

Submission from the National Union of Journalists to Ofcom on 'The Future of Radio' consultation.

The NUJ is the UK's journalist's trade union with more than 40,000 members. A substantial number of these work in the broadcasting sector - including local, regional, national, and digital commercial radio stations. This submission echoes concerns previously registered by the NUJ both to Ofcom and the Radio Authority.

Terms of submission:

Ofcom sets out six proposals in its paper on the future of radio. It is our intention to concentrate on the two of these; content regulation as it affects commercial analogue and DAB radio. We will also comment on proposal two, which discusses aligning ownership rules for analogue and digital radio.

The growth of small scale stations - those serving fewer than 30,000 people - has been an important step forward in providing real competition for some of the older "heritage" stations. For the first time, many communities now have their own local source of news, information and entertainment.

The quality of news provision (and ultimately journalism) on such stations varies widely, and usually depends on the parent group's commitment to providing news. Some stations started off as stand alone enterprise, but financial pressures means they have merged with larger companies.

Submission:

Proposal 1. The regulation of content on analogue commercial radio and on DAB digital radio should be aligned at the appropriate time.

The NUJ sees some merit and some significant causes for concern in the proposals outlined by Ofcom.

We welcome the suggestion that legislation could be amended to give Ofcom control over the provision of local material on both analogue and digital stations. As digital listening increases it is essential that the regulator's statutory duties evolve to reflect this.

The idea of linking station size, in terms of the licence coverage area, with local output levels for both analogue and digital stations is also a logical one.

However the proposals outlined by Ofcom set the minimums too low. The NUJ's own research shows the changes would lead to a significant fall in the number of hours of local programming produced.

A sample of how the proposals might affect current stations is shown in the table below.

Although the proposals would set minimum levels the reality, as in the past, is that producers would see this as effectively a maximum.

| Station Name | Current hours of local programming per weekday | Minimum hours of local programming per weekday in future | Percentage drop (to nearest %) |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Seven FM, Ballymena | 24 | 4 | 83 % |
| Radio Pembrokeshire | 17 | 4 | 77 % |
| Essex FM | 16 | 8 | 50 % |
| Moray Firth Radio | 18 | 8 | 56 % |
| Plymouth Sound FM | 16 | 13 | 19 % |
| U105 Belfast | 24 | 13 | 46 % |
| Radio City 96.7 Liverpool | 16 | 13 | 19 % |

*

The average potential drop in locally produced programmes across this sample would be 50%.

The NUJ is concerned that such a significant re-balancing away from local material will fatally wound the commercial radio sector. It is our belief that stations win listeners and advertising because of their unique local nature. Although it is cheaper to provide networked programmes at the expense of listeners, we do not believe this is a sustainable strategy long-term - as it would be against the interest of the citizen.

We also dismiss the notion that keeping local programming at 'key times of day' is sufficient to protect the interests of listeners. Those who listen during the day or at weekends have the same rights to a high standard of local programmes as those who listen at drive or breakfast time.

Our second concern is that cutting the need for local programming will in turn harm the quality of local news bulletins and programmes.

Regulation must ensure that sufficient News programmes and bulletins are carried within the provisions for local content.

As stations network and co-ordinate more programming, there is likely to be an equivalent centralisation of staff - including journalists.

The NUJ is opposed to the spread of so-called 'news hubs' because of the impossibility of covering local news, especially breaking stories, effectively.

Ofcom proposes that co-location of studios could take place, subject to agreement and according to 'specified criteria'. There is not enough information given on what these criteria might be for useful comment to be made.

But we would re-state our position that if local news is to have real meaning it must reflect and come from the local population it serves. This means it should be investigated, prepared and presented locally.

We believe Ofcom's proposals will lead to a weakening of that structure. The problem was summed up by the Daily Telegraph's radio critic Gillian Reynolds, at the recent

Westminster Media Forum on the Future of Radio:

What do you do to grow local journalism, when you're cutting down in commercial radio, the sources of it? And a back to the future thought came into my head. How do you cover another area, when you're miles and miles away and you don't necessarily know the street names or the local affinities or the local politics and Andrew was quite (transcript gap) that this could be done. And I thought, I know what they'll do, they'll do what they used to do in the olden days, in the pirate days, they'll listen to the BBC local radio station and nick the news.***

We believe these proposals will stop commercial radio stations being the much-needed competition to BBC local radio stations. This will lead in turn to a weakening of local news provision and a consequent decline in democratic participation. It is important that all sections of society have access to quality news programming - this serves effective democratic participation.

Proposal 2. There may be a case for Government to consider bringing together the ownership rules regarding analogue commercial radio and DAB digital radio into a single set of rules as the proportion of listening accounted for by digital platforms increases.

In this proposal Ofcom argues for giving stations the flexibility to merge, by combining ownership rules for digital and analogue platforms. It believes this will not mean plurality levels falling below what it determines as 'sufficient' (two local providers plus the BBC). The NUJ does not accept the argument that allowing stations to merge will protect plurality, or lead to so-called 'robust plurality'. Once again we believe it will in effect mean more shared programming and news produced away from its local roots.

Summary:

It is our belief that to ensure Ofcom meets its own strategic aim of 'securing citizens interests through the provision of radio designed to meet public purposes', sufficient intervention is necessary.

Ofcom itself states 'we do not believe that the market would necessarily supply local programming [?.] as local programming is expensive, and it is always likely to be more profitable to network as much programming as possible, even if that means a drop in audiences.'

We believe setting such low localness requirements is putting profits above people. We believe it will mean citizens' interests are damaged by a loss of local programming, a decline in plurality and a further fall-off of democratic involvement.

Although the concern is that the broadcasters can't afford to produce local programming our argument would be Ofcom can't afford to let them stop.

We would urge the regulator to re-think these proposals to protect the public interest.

Regulation must ensure that sufficient News programmes and bulletins are carried within the provisions for local content.

* David Ayrton, NUJ Research Officer

** Please note this excerpt is from a transcript of the event produced by the

Westminster

Media Forum and the speaker has not had the opportunity to make any corrections.

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