

June 29th 2011

Response to ‘A Communications Review for the Digital Age’, an Open Letter from Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport, published 16 May 2011.

The International Broadcasting Trust is an educational and media charity working to promote high quality broadcast and online coverage of the developing world.

Our expertise is in research about the content which tells the public about the wider world. Therefore we limit our response to this consultation to Question 11 which focuses on public service broadcasting. We have recently published research which examines international coverage on television in 2010 and attach a copy of this report to this submission.

Q11. Should the core focus of public service broadcasting be on original UK content?

IBT believes that original UK content is a crucial aspect of public service broadcasting because the social, cultural and economic benefits of content produced in the UK for British television audiences are undeniable. There has been a 19% drop in investment in original UK content on the main public service broadcasters since 2004¹. This decline is likely to continue without incentives or legislation to encourage growth. Therefore we would urge the Government to include measures in the forthcoming Communications Bill which ensure that commercial PSBs must, as part of their licence, commission an appropriate amount of UK produced content.

UK produced content is essential for the UK as an informed, democratic society because it is produced from a UK perspective, reflecting the world we live in from a British point of view. We welcome the Government’s ambition to encourage growth in this market by developing legislation which removes barriers to growth, but IBT believes that there should not be de-regulation at the expense of public service broadcasting content. There still needs to be legislation to ensure the future provision of high quality public service content on television which might otherwise not be provided.

In addition to a requirement from the commercial Public Service Broadcasters (ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) to fund guaranteed levels of original UK content, there are other aspects of public service content which need to be guaranteed and protected by legislation to ensure their provision. These include

- High quality programming.

¹ Ofcom PSB Report 2010

- A diversity of suppliers to provide different approaches and perspectives.²
- Content needs to be universally available and free at the point of access.
- There should be programming which informs us about and engages us with the world outside the UK. 83% of people rate programmes which help them understand what's going on in the world as important³
- Television news should remain impartial. Impartiality of news was considered important by 93% of respondents in recent Ofcom research.⁴

In this submission we wish to focus on one aspect of public service provision which we believe is of crucial importance: the value of international content on television

We need to consider carefully the precise value of public service broadcasting to the UK today and its likely contribution in the future. We must be forward looking. It is our view that public service content has a crucial role to play in providing UK citizens with the skills and knowledge which they need to live, prosper and compete in a globalised society. Today and in the future, it is soft skills which are crucial: communication, creativity, knowledge, confidence, the capacity for innovation. The media and television, in particular, has a crucial contribution to make.

If we want to build a well-informed society, with the skills and knowledge to do business effectively with other countries, with a population which is able and willing to travel widely and appreciate other cultures, then we need access to engaging content which tells us about those other cultures. Television has huge power and influence, and the ability to reach mainstream audiences so that we can live in a society where the majority of the population has an accurate and up to date understanding of the world outside the UK.

IBT believes that it should be a commitment of any public service broadcaster to provide content which enables audiences to understand the wider world.

Ofcom's audience research demonstrates that viewers highly value information about the world around them as one of the most important aspects of PSB⁵. This argument is not one which we are alone in believing.

The benefits of international content on television which helps us to understand the wider world are numerous. They include:

- Economic benefits through us understanding how other countries/businesses work
- Cultural and racial tolerance
- Social cohesion within the UK
- The ability to travel abroad with realistic expectations
- An engagement with issues which affect us as part of a globalised society

Globalisation

² 9 out of 10 people do not want the BBC to be the only provider of public service content in the future (Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, Phase 2)

³ Ofcom PSB Report 2010

⁴ Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, television: 2010 Ofcom

⁵ Ofcom PSB Report 2010, Purpose 1

The pace of world globalisation in the past 30 years has increased⁶ – economically, politically and socially. While the UK is socially globalised (7th in the world) which means we are well connected with the rest of the world in terms of the spread of ideas, information, images and people, we are far behind the rest of Europe in terms of political globalisation (90th) which means we are not well connected with the rest of the world politically.⁷

It is clear that UK citizens need to be informed about what is going on internationally, yet there is evidence that the UK public's awareness of the wider world is low:

When asked to name countries currently experiencing conflict, while 69% and 65% of those questioned identified Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, less than 1% of respondents were able to identify other countries including Sudan, Somalia, and Central African Republic. Almost one in five (18%) were unable to name five countries in the world in conflict⁸

In order for the UK population to be able to participate in this increasingly globalised world in a meaningful and effective manner, we need to know what is going on in the wider world outside the UK. If we are to work with foreign businesses or governments we need to understand their cultures and attitudes. This is essential for the future of our economy and society. UK produced content on television which relates our experience as UK citizens with that of countries around the world is therefore crucial.

Social cohesion

There is persuasive evidence that if people are exposed to engaging information about the world outside the UK, it not only 'connects' them emotionally to that world, increases interest and understanding, but it also leads to greater social cohesion within the UK.⁹ 'It was found that children who experience global learning in school are keen to understand more about the problems of the world...more likely than average to believe...that people like them have the ability to make a difference in the world and are more open to people of different backgrounds than those who have not experienced global learning in school.'

Research into international PSB content

IBT's latest 2011 research (*Outside the Box*)¹⁰ shows a 50% decline in the amount of non-news programming about the developing world on the public service broadcasters' terrestrial channels since 1989. It also shows a decline of 41% in international programming on the same channels since 2005.¹¹ This decline in international content which is free to access and designed for mass audiences is deeply worrying when set against the increased impacts of globalisation on our lives and economy. Increased international travel, migration, the development of the internet and other global interconnections have increased our interdependency on the wider world, yet we have less content on television which can

⁶ http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/static/pdf/method_2011.pdf

⁷ http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/static/pdf/method_2011.pdf

⁸ Poll of 2072 people across the UK, conducted by ICM on behalf of the British Red Cross, 2008

⁹ Ipsos Mori Poll for DEA 2008

¹⁰ IBT, *Outside the Box* June 2011

¹¹ Ofcom, PSB Report 2010

provide us with a context for news information. One example which typifies this situation is that there was no single programme on any channel in 2010 about most of the countries currently involved in the Arab Spring – Libya, Bahrain, Yemen to name but three. This means that the public has little, wider understanding from television about these countries beyond the tumultuous events of recent months.

IBT's *Outside the Box* report also shows that if current trends continue on mainstream television, instead of broadening understanding, television is likely to limit people's horizons. It is doing this by increasingly reinforcing stereotypes about other countries and moving programmes about international affairs onto niche channels which attract far fewer viewers and smaller budgets. The number of countries covered over the past five years by the public service broadcasters has remained static as has the choice of countries covered (52% of countries were not the main subject of any programme in 2010¹²). We see the same countries on our screens year in and year out without change. This is a trend which concerns IBT because it is potentially leading to a narrowing of our horizons and a limited understanding of the world around us.

It is IBT's view that these trends in international content provision will lead to increased insularity and isolationism in the UK at a time when, as global citizens, we need to engage with the rest of the world.

We believe therefore that there should be provision in any new communications legislation which ensures high quality content about the wider world in prime time television schedules.

ITV and Channel 5

In return for their privileged position on the EPG, we believe that the two commercial public service broadcasters, ITV and Channel 5, should continue to have a legal requirement to provide news and current affairs in peak time.

This should include domestic and international news in live bulletins broadcast in peak time, between 6pm and 11pm, and at other times during the day. 75% of respondents in the 2010 Ofcom PSB Review cite television as their main source of world news.¹³ While the internet is undoubtedly a valuable resource, only 9% of respondents cited it as their primary source of information for world news. It can be seen from this that live television news is highly important to the public despite the growth of the internet.¹⁴

The vast majority of respondents in the Ofcom survey also cited impartiality in news as important to them. IBT considers legislation governing impartiality as an essential element in policy to maintain public trust in television and radio news.

Plurality is also essential to guarantee competition and quality in news provision as well providing a range of voices.

¹² IBT, *Outside the Box* June 2011 p 12

¹³ Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, television: 2010 Ofcom

¹⁴ Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, television: 2010 Ofcom

We acknowledge that the cost of providing good quality, accurate news is high. While the audience values news as the second most important aspect of public service broadcasting, as the cost of maintaining news coverage, especially international news coverage, rises, IBT is concerned that the quality, accuracy and breadth of coverage may be compromised by the economics of production.

Therefore we believe that there should be measures in any new legislation which guarantee the provision of high quality, impartial, accurate international news coverage which is universally available and free at the point of access from ITV and Channel 5.

Channel 4

It is IBT's view that Channel 4's purposes as a PSB should be retained as set out in the Digital Economy Act of 2010.

Channel 4 plays a hugely valuable role in providing alternative perspectives of the world. *Channel 4 News* is one of the most international news programmes on UK television and its current affairs strands *Dispatches* and *Unreported World* provide us with reporting from countries which are rarely covered elsewhere on public service channels.

IBT would like the following purposes to be retained in full:

(b) to support and stimulate well-informed debate on a wide range of issues, including by providing access to information and views from around the world and by challenging established views,

(c) to promote alternative views and new perspectives, and

(d) to provide access to material that is intended to inspire people to make changes in their lives.

IBT believes internationalism is at the heart of Channel 4's unique role as a public service broadcaster and that this should be retained.

Children's television

In light of the widely recognised market failure of provision of television for children aged 6 - 16, notwithstanding Channel 4's future provision which may provide online content for 10-14 year olds, IBT would like to encourage the Government to explore all possible avenues to rectify this situation. Children have the right to high quality television which tells them about the wider world. In IBT research it was found that there is a scarcity of programming which informs them of the world outside the UK. Data collected both by IBT for its research *Screening the World* (2008) and that collected by Ofcom indicates that children are poorly served with programming which tells them about the world outside the UK and US. Yet, according to research conducted by DFID, children are reliant on television as their main source of information about the world outside the UK: 72% of children questioned said TV news was their main source of information about what is happening in poor countries.¹⁵

¹⁵ UK-wide youth omnibus survey run by GfKNOP April-July 2008.

Background: The International Broadcasting Trust

The International Broadcasting Trust is an educational and media charity working to promote high quality broadcast and online coverage of the developing world. Our aim is to further awareness and understanding of the lives of the majority of the world's people – and the issues which affect them.

Our work focuses on three main areas of activity:

- lobbying Government, regulators and broadcasters
- dialogue with the main public service broadcasters
- research on broadcast and online coverage of the developing world

We regularly publish research and organise events to encourage a greater understanding of the role which the media plays in engaging people in the UK with the wider world.

We are a membership based organisation. We organise briefings for our members so that they can work more closely with broadcasters and producers.

IBT's current membership includes the following organisations: ActionAid, Age UK, Amnesty, British Red Cross, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Comic Relief, Concern, DEC, HelpAge International, IDS, International Service, Islamic Relief, Malaria Consortium, Merlin, MSF, ONE, Oxfam, PANOS, Plan, Progressio, RedR, Save the Children, Tearfund, Think Global, Traidcraft Exchange, TVE, UNICEF, VSO, WaterAid, World Vision and WWF.