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Mr Tim Gardam
Independent Reviewer of the BBC's Digital Services
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London
SW1Y 5DH

REVIEW OF BBC DIGITAL RADIO SERVICES

Thank you for this consultation and the opportunity to comment on the BBC's Digital Radio Services: 1Xtra, The Asian Network, BBC 5 Live Sports Extra, Radio 6 Music and Radio 7, and the World Service.

The BBC's Digital Radio Services should be in keeping with the BBC's core purposes and distinct from commercial propositions. They should add value. And they should contribute to the drive for digital take up.

Has the BBC met the commitments and conditions contained in the proposals and their acceptance by the Secretary of State? What is the market impact of these new services on the commercial radio sector?

In general it is our impression that the BBC's Digital Radio Services are developing in ways that are in keeping with the BBC's core purposes and that they are distinct from commercial propositions. They do add value and that value is growing. These services are contributing to take up of digital, a campaign and project in which the BBC is playing a full and leading role. We believe that the BBC is meeting the commitments and conditions contained in the proposals and acceptance by the Secretary of State.

Inevitably much of our submission is opinion. We are not a research organisation and rely upon the views of our members who are the churches and individual Christian people and organisations involved in and with the media.

1Xtra is building an important relationship with a young audience, particularly those from ethnic minorities. It is also encouraging and nurturing young musical talent. This is of benefit to the radio, music and entertainment industries in general. It is distinctive. It is not in direct competition with a national or local commercial station. It does not stop commercial stations playing similar music. It is attracting a new audience of some who were not previously radio listeners and others for whom this is their preference – the latter is a perfectly reasonable

market response. Commercial stations can choose to compete and ‘do it better’ if they wish.

The Asian Network has been an extremely timely and valuable extension of the original local station, which started in Leicestershire. It is making a real community and cultural contribution across the UK. It is clearly distinctive. Commercial and BBC local and national stations can provide their own material aimed at this audience within the contexts of their outputs, which will offer choice.

BBC 5 Live Sports Extra is a natural extension of the BBC’s radio coverage of sport. It provides additional coverage of events, which would not otherwise be broadcast. It does not impinge upon the availability of commercial stations to broadcast as the rights are already owned by the BBC. In this case it is the BBC’s own audience which is fragmented. But conversely it provides greater choice by so doing thus also attracting others who would not listen to the main station’s output. It is entirely complementary, provides increased choice and is an excellent example of the benefits of digital multi-channel capability.

Radio 6 Music is distinctive and largely new. It is giving airtime to artists and music outside the main play lists and mainstream. Thus it is extending choice and outlets for artists. It is therefore not impinging upon any commercial stations.

Radio 7 is entirely distinctive. It allows access to the rich BBC archives, which would not otherwise be available. It offers new generations access to radio classics. This complements and extends the choice for those who are actual or potential Radio 4 listeners. It also has a crucial part to play in bringing the young to radio listenership. We particularly welcome this aspect. There is no impact here on the commercial radio sector.

World Service on digital gives UK-wide access to this completely distinctive station. This adds to the radio output, which caters for ethnic minorities. This is the epitome of public service broadcasting. There is no impact here on the commercial sector.

The Digital Services contribution in the wider context of the Review of the BBC’s Charter.

Here we can offer some data. In the most recent national census 72% of people said they are Christian and (in round numbers) 80% of the people of the UK expressed themselves as having a faith. Recent surveys have shown the greatest ever levels of interest in spirituality. Recent BBC surveys of local radio and Radio 4 listeners about religious broadcasting have convinced hitherto sceptical controllers and managing editors of the value of and need for increased religious programming and reinforced the resolve of those who had already been convinced.

In December 2003 the Church of England and English Heritage undertook a survey. This showed that 86% of adults in Britain visited a church or place of worship during the previous year. 17% had attended a concert; 13% were

‘walking past and felt the need to go in’. 19% went in to find a quiet space. Others had attended Christmas or Easter services, baptisms, weddings or funerals, as well as regular worshippers (regular may mean say once a month or more frequently).

We use this information to show the huge level of involvement with religion in this country. It is an integral part of people’s lives. Thus religious output should also be an integral part of the broadcasting, which is offered to them. We do not want to see more ‘God slots’. Rather we want there to be a general awareness of this aspect in the minds of the controllers, schedulers and programme makers. We want them to work in partnership with the churches and other faiths so that religion is reflected in the output as a whole.

So we are disappointed that the latest BBC Statements of Programme Policy for 2004/2005 still has so little reference to religion in the Statements for the Digital Radio Services. This is despite our pointing out this deficiency to the Chairman last year. The Asian Network is an exception, although even here religion only rates as the last of the ‘Other commitments’, which bring up the rear. Nevertheless, the output of this station does have reasonable religious content. However, we would caution against any tendency to treat certain faiths in purely ‘cultural’ terms and thus assume that since the Asian Network covers Islam or Hinduism, for example, there is less need for these faiths to be properly covered on more general stations.

We accept there will be little religious content on BBC 5 Live Sports Extra. We welcome the national access to the excellent religious output on the World Service.

However, if part of the remit for Radio 7 is to ‘build a learning society’ is there a greater need today than to inform and educate listeners about faith issues to enable bridges to be built and ignorance and prejudice to be broken down? Also, there are many great religious and ethical programmes in the BBC’s archives. This was shown in the BBC’s recent celebrations of its 80 years of religious broadcasting. So many times, the great events of our history have been marked with impressive church ceremonies and services. But religious experience and interest is not limited just to times of national celebration, crisis or tragedy. It is a part of everyday life.

Religion and ethics should be integrated into the music and speech output on 1Xtra and Radio 6 Music. This is a key element that is missing from delivery of a full PSB service and the BBC’s core purposes. We trust that in future the BBC will have full regard to this and all PSB aspects when introducing and developing all new services.

When the BBC covers and includes religion on its analogue radio services generally it does so very well. We want that to extend to all of its radio stations, especially its digital ones, as we recognise their growing importance and impact. As we approach the digital multi-channel age it is increasingly important that on radio the BBC provides a full range of integrated religious output. This is a distinctive BBC element as commercial stations have no obligation to do so and mostly do not do so, although there are some notable exceptions. However, the

BBC religious output is largely different in style from that of commercial stations and so there is no impact here on the commercial sector.

Once again, we are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and look forward to the outcome in due course. Please do not hesitate to contact us at any stage if you think we may be able to assist with this or any other relevant exercises and activities.

The Churches' Media Council brings together the Churches, Christians in the media, Christian broadcasting organisations, the broadcasting authorities and training organisations. This response is submitted on behalf of the Council's representatives of the member Churches and Christian organisations (in no particular order: Church of England; Roman Catholic Church; Methodist Church; The Free Churches' Group; Baptist Union of Great Britain; Salvation Army; Evangelical Alliance; United Reformed Church; Church of Wales; Church of Scotland; Church of Ireland; Churches Together in Britain & Ireland; Churches Together in England; Action of Churches Together in Scotland; Churches Together in Wales) and is the result of an ecumenical conversation between them. Some individual institutional churches may also be making their own responses to this consultation.

Peter Blackman
Director