

Sustainable Independent and Impartial News: in the Nations, locally and in the regions

June 2009 Consultation

Response from Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland

Summary

The Digital Britain project was widely welcomed here as it appeared to promise so much for Northern Ireland in terms of sustaining the public service broadcasting (PSB) mix and providing a channel for the hopes and aspirations of the broadcasting sector, the political community and citizens more widely, all of whom regard PSB as an important mechanism for helping to heal this society and nurture its fragile democracy; it has, however, singularly failed to deliver.

This Committee believes a huge opportunity is being missed, especially for Northern Ireland, to introduce pilots flexible enough to genuinely support both what might be lost but also to what might, with a degree of imagination, be gained.

Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland is particularly concerned at the narrow focus of the Digital Britain Report and the resulting implementation plan. The fears raised here by the name of the project unfortunately seem to have been borne out with the adoption of a "one size fits all" approach –aimed at addressing the key PSB deficit in Britain, namely regional news - but which ignores the areas most under threat here in Northern Ireland.

In every other arena, apart it seems from the Digital Britain Report, PSB is regarded as a mix of news, current affairs and non-news programming which reflects the cultural diversity of the UK as a whole, recognises the need for specific provision appropriate to each nation, including indigenous language programming, and provides opportunities for each nation to see itself portrayed on UK-wide television.

Only in the area of news is provision in Northern Ireland adequate; in all other areas of PSB Northern Ireland is significantly behind England, Scotland and Wales as far as funding, either by government or by the BBC, is concerned.

We believe that the use of contestable funding needs to be rethought as far as Northern Ireland is concerned and, given the unique set of circumstances here, should be directed towards the wider purposes of PSB. We therefore propose that a fourth pilot be included for Northern Ireland.

1. During Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review the ACNI welcomed the opportunity to comment on a future model for the provision of PSB in the nations that was not tied to a 'one size fits all' paradigm. We recognized that there would be similarities with other devolved nations but in our consultation response, and in other related responses, we noted that the specific needs of Northern Ireland, as far as PSB was concerned, needed to be addressed.
2. In responding to Ofcom's Consultation on PSB the Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland (ACNI) was strongly of the view, a view widely shared in Northern Ireland, that some form of contestable fund was the answer to the PSB deficit that would arise here as a result of DSO. We therefore welcome Digital Britain's acceptance that some form of public funding needs to go into the provision of PSB beyond the BBC if appropriate PSB is to be sustained.
3. During that debate, and in the one which continued following the publication of the Interim Digital Britain Report, it seemed to us that the discussion focused on four areas of concern - plurality of source for news and views about the nations; programming beyond news (including indigenous language programming) which properly reflected the political, social and cultural life as well as that of the three devolved nations; network production from the nations to ensure that they were properly represented to the rest of the UK; and children's programming.
4. There was an expectation here in Northern Ireland that a contestable fund would help solve many of Northern Ireland's broadcasting problems by addressing not just news, but also the hugely important areas of current affairs, non-news, and indigenous language broadcasting, the last of which is characterised by underfunding and uncertainty in Northern Ireland, in contrast to the situations pertaining in Wales and Scotland.
5. Despite the wide-ranging debates which took place in Scotland and Wales as well as in Northern Ireland - not least at the two best attended conferences that Ofcom has ever held in Northern Ireland - the focus of attention appears to have been reduced to one genre only, namely news - for reasons to do with what appears to be either an inability or unwillingness on the part of ITV plc to continuing to serve Wales and the English regions.
6. But to focus on news alone - and to take a 'one size fits all' approach (something which we thought had been generally accepted should no longer happen in the devolved environments we now have in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) is both short-sighted and inequitable. In Northern Ireland, for reasons to do with history and geography, news has been and remains our strongest area of PSB. All other areas are weaker than elsewhere in the UK and need public support if they are to be maintained beyond the BBC.

Comparative data

	Northern Ireland	UK Average	Scotland	Wales
Spend per head on PSB programming for nation	£29m	£76.5m	£54m	£33m
Spend per head on PSB network programming	£3.38	£31.21	£9.67	£11.02
Viewing of early evening local news (per year)	24	18	22	17

Comparative data on indigenous language programming

	Welsh	Gaelic	Irish	Ulster Scots
Annual Public Funding	£94m – DCMS to S4C	£12m – Scottish Government to MG Alba	£3m via DCAL to ILBF until 2009, from UK Government 2009 - 2011	DCAL funded – but not for broadcasting
BBC/PSB input per year	c 520hrs of content to S4C (value £22.5m)	£7.8m funding in content	£950,000 of content from BBC NI from 2009 (365 hrs from RTÉ to TG4 in Rol)	£400,000 of content from BBC NI from 2009

- PSB television has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in this divided society as one of the few institutions that contributes to a shared sense of identity and a sense of common purpose. News, as in the rest of the UK, is hugely important here; indeed it has traditionally been more important in Northern Ireland than elsewhere with people tuning in on a nightly basis throughout the ‘Troubles’ to BBC NI’s and UTV’s news programmes (and often to those from RTÉ also) to find out what had been happening – a habit which persists with higher viewing figures in Northern Ireland for regional news than elsewhere in the UK. But other areas of PSB are equally important. Indeed, as already argued, other genres, namely current affairs and non-news programming, play a crucial role in providing a sense of shared identity in a highly divided society – hugely important at a time of cautious optimism and hope. Not to support these aspects of PSB, and to merely provide a ‘one size fits all’ solution, is to ignore the differences that exist in Northern Ireland and to ignore the powerful role that the full range of PSB genres can play in supporting the process of emerging from the past.

8. Our concern is that Northern Ireland, already at a disadvantage as far as public funding for broadcasting is concerned (compare the amounts that Wales and Scotland receive from the public purse to what NI receives), and likewise at the bottom of all the tables as far as network production is concerned, will again be left out in the cold. The unfortunate title of the project, which ignored Northern Ireland's place as part of the United Kingdom seems, as feared, to be living up to its name in that we have a report for three not four parts of the UK! In fact, it appears that we are to be penalised and further disadvantaged simply because we still have in UTV a licensee which is independent of ITV plc and is prepared to properly serve its viewers, at least in the short term.
9. The DCMS consultation paper confirms the view that the widespread availability of high quality UK-produced content across a range of areas – from news and current affairs to children's programming and drama – is essential to the cultural, social and democratic life of the United Kingdom. It goes on to say that it is necessary to distinguish between where plurality is desirable and where it is essential, and for most people that is news. We would contend that plurality in provision beyond news in this divided society - which is only now beginning to take tentative steps towards normality after more than 30 years of conflict - is essential and not merely desirable. We also believe that children's programming is an essential and not a desirable.
10. The public service broadcasting mix here is unique and includes not only the Northern Ireland broadcasters - BBC NI and UTV – and the UK PSBs but also the Republic of Ireland PSBs which have acted, and continue to act, for most of the population as a further source of plurality. But we should not be dependent on sources funded from beyond our own public purse. And Northern Ireland is also unique in having the lowest levels of public intervention and the most fragile production base of any part of the UK. One area in which NI has had some success, namely children's television is precisely an area which if new contestable funding were directed towards it could potentially benefit NI. Indeed many people expected Northern Ireland to be nominated as a pilot for producing children's programming since this would have the double benefit of contributing both to greater representation on the UK networks and supporting the production base here.
11. Therefore, we believe that while the idea of using the BBC digital surplus to support areas of public service broadcasting which are under threat – like news across much of Great Britain - is sound and supportable, the definition of what is under threat needs to be broadened to include the full range of PSB programming – news, current affairs and non-news programming; programming beyond news which properly reflects the political, social and cultural life, including the indigenous languages of the UK; network production from the nations to ensure that they are properly represented to the rest of the UK; and children's programming.
12. We welcome the assurance that DCMS will be open to alternative suggestions and urge you to consider the points we have made.

In summary, therefore, and in response to the List of Consultation Question

Question 1 – Absolutely – hence the need for specific intervention to address Northern Ireland’s specific needs.

Question 2 – Absolutely – but as already argued – in this society it needs to go beyond news.

Question 3 – Yes.

Question 4 – In considering the Northern Ireland situation such funding should be available to fund other forms of essential PSB – our arguments above make the point that it should not be limited to news.

Question 5 – No – but alternative mechanisms should be explored to supplement this route.

Question 6 – Yes.

Question 7 – Yes.

Question 8 – No.

Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland

22 September 2009