



Response to DCMS consultation on Sustainable Independent and Impartial News September 2009

About RIG

The Radio Independents Group (RIG) represents the UK independent radio and audio production sector.

Over the last 15 years this sector has grown from a handful of companies and freelancers, into a vibrant and forward-looking industry of some 150 companies.

We are fully aware that new and converging delivery platforms require new ways of thinking and working on the part of content producers. Radio independents have been at the cutting edge of radio and audio development, many of the companies pioneering digital services (e.g. text-based programming, online radio, DAB, interactive radio).

As a stakeholder in the Government's communications policy, we have followed the Digital Britain process closely and submitted our views on the Interim Report. That response emphasised that over the next 15 years, with some intervention and support from the Government, RIG is confident that the sector can continue to grow; to be a source of employment, training and development for the audio arts in the UK; and to bring money in to UK plc through a combination of the sale of content via online services, international sales, and the development of cross-platform formats.

Whilst we accepted, in our response to the Interim Report, that the main radio focus of Digital Britain lay with the issues around a move to DAB, we nevertheless were keen to emphasise the role independent production can play in revitalising and sustaining local content production around the UK.

Government policy must ensure that it bears in mind the need to involve all UK content creators fully in the continuing evolution and convergence of the communications industries. There is already in place a successful and motivated, experienced and prepared industry waiting to take advantage of any new or enlarged markets.

General Comments

Below we give our specific views on the proposals within this current consultation, which has followed on from the Digital Britain process.

However on a general level, it is important to bear in mind during the current and future debates on independent contestable funding for news and other forms of programming that, ideally, the BBC should be looking to modernise its attitude to using the licence fee. This could be done by expanding its current limited partnership proposals to move upstream from the idea of sharing BBC-produced content to a situation where the content creation itself in areas like radio/audio and new media was being more evenly shared amongst in-house and independent suppliers, akin to the Window of Creative Competition (WOCC) that operates in television commissioning.

Without question RIG believes that the future for creating a sustainable creative infrastructure across the UK means seeking to integrate local independent content producers into all publicly funded broadcast services.

As a first principle, it should be that the licence fee is channelled through the BBC, assuming that this is done with the appropriate enthusiasm and imagination that would befit an organisation properly structured and imbued with the need to work as closely as possible with the UK's creative community. It is to the BBC's detriment that we have not seen more BBC-branded contestable funding set up as part of a new approach to partnership, for example along the lines of the 4IP project run by Channel 4, a PSB with far less funds than the BBC.

Answers to Consultation Questions

1. Do you agree that securing plural sources of impartial news for the Nations, locally and in the regions should be a key priority?

As independent production companies, radio/audio producers are firmly in support of plurality both in terms of services provided, and in terms of the suppliers of content to those services. The existence of adequately-funded plural news networks in UK broadcasting has in our opinion greatly enhanced the democratic process and kept UK news provision to a high standard. This is applicable to news provision in the nations, regions and more locally.

2. Do you agree that sustainable, impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions is likely to require some top-up public funding?

In the current economic climate it is without doubt a major challenge to maintain a plurality of impartial news services without some form of additional funding.

3. Do you agree that the Television Licence Fee should be used to support impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions in addition to BBC services?

As a major contributor to BBC content, and a strong supporter of publicly-funded public service broadcasting, RIG is in favour of a well-funded BBC which works fully in partnership with the UK's creative industries. As our submission to Digital Britain Interim Report stated, we do not currently believe the BBC is carrying out the latter function as fully as it might, not least regarding access to BBC radio commissioning. Despite this we would argue that in general it is important to continue to have the BBC use the bulk of the licence fee to supply PSB services, whilst continuing to develop its partnership agenda.

However in terms of the identified 'surplus' allocated for digital switchover, we believe there is a case for that resource being allocated to set up a contestable fund for local news services as is suggested in this consultation.

4. Do you agree that any funding within a contained contestable element of the television licence fee not required for impartial news should potentially be available to fund other forms of essential public service content, or should such funding be limited to news?

RIG takes the line that 'news' should be expanded to include current affairs output in particular investigate documentaries. Such programmes, made by and for people based in a particular region, have a real public value in that they contribute to maintaining and strengthening communities across Britain whilst encouraging healthy discussion of key issues.

Despite this there is currently a gap in the provision of such programming, either on radio or on television, with the decline of such output made by BBC and ITV. In addition, local BBC radio services are increasingly following the Radio 5Live format of reporting on stories as they become public. The result is a lack of investigative programming, in which a small team is given the time to research and produce programmes about hidden stories. Finally, the decline of regional newspapers has also led to a falling away of such investigative journalism in local print media.

Given the right funding structure, regional broadcast radio, supported by audio podcasts and other digital formats, provides an economical and flexible way for people to hear local programmes about their local issues and environment. Contestable funding could be made available to finance a weekly investigative programme strand. To be economically sustainable, such programming would need to be commissioned across a year, and made at a regional level – BBC local radio already has a small amount of programming which is broadcast on a regional basis and commercial radio might also find this sustainable. The cost of one such strand would be minor in the scale of things – perhaps between £200-250k a year.

Such programme strands could become important anchorpoints for regional radio services, associating them with an insight into the key issues affecting an individual's particular region, and therefore in turn would provide strong support for the more straightforward news reporting services on which the consultation is focussed.

5. Are there alternative funding mechanisms that you believe would deliver the above objectives more effectively?

It is important that, whilst we support the application of the current identified 'digital surplus' to the establishment of local news services, RIG emphasises that we would not wish to see the licence fee diverted on a regular basis for more such projects. Therefore it is certainly important for all parties to continue to consider alternative options for obtaining funding for such projects in the future.

6. Do you agree with the proposal to set a maximum percentage of Television Licence Fee revenue which could be set aside as a contained contestable element?

Such a step would certainly go some way to alleviating concerns held in some quarters that using part of the licence fee for non-BBC purpose would set a dangerous precedent.

7. Do you agree that amending the BBC Agreement could provide the necessary protection to the BBC's future funding and independence?

The DCMS should be very aware that even setting a maximum level would itself be a measure that would be liable to alteration in future years by future administrations. There is also a danger it could be used by a future administration as a bargaining tool to reduce the BBC's ability to be independent of the Government of the day.

8. Do you agree that the use of any contained contestable element within the Television Licence Fee should be restricted to the public purposes set out in the BBC Charter?

RIG firmly agrees with this proposal. The purposes set out in the Charter are the basis for public service broadcasting, and should be adhered to when using the licence fee for any other purpose.