



**For the attention of
Lord Burns and his panel
and dcms**

**Third World & Environment
Broadcasting Project**

www.ibt.org.uk/3WE

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3WE COMMENTS ON THE BBC'S INTERNATIONAL ROLE

Submitted to the panel for the session on 24th November 2004

1. Summary Points

- Knowledge and understanding of international and global issues is an essential part of the communications needs, rights and interests of UK citizens in the information society
- UK citizens are currently under-served by the mainstream media with international content
- The quantity and range of non-news factual programming on 'matters of international significance or interest' across all five public service TV channels has been steadily diminishing and is at its lowest level since 1989 – and the BBC has been part of this trend
- The provider best placed to provide such content, across a full range of tri-media services (TV radio and online), is the BBC
- TV channels 3 and Five will further reduce their commitments to factual programming on these issues; while Channel 4 will struggle to maintain its already-diminished levels
- An international dimension to the content of the BBC's services is essential to 'building public value' in all the areas posited by the BBC – informed democracy, connecting communities, building cultural value, and lifelong learning – but is not emphasised within the statements in *Building Public Value*

- The statement of how the BBC will build ‘global value’ emphasises its role in exporting values and content to the rest of the world. The Burns panel questions, and the BBC’s submission to the panel, follow this lead. The role of the BBC in bringing international content to UK citizens is downplayed.
- 3WE urges the panel, the dcms and the Secretary of State to re-examine the terms of the debate on the BBC’s international role
- 3WE recommends that, within the Green Paper, the BBC should be expected to establish an international strategy across all of its mainstream domestic services that will guarantee that UK citizens are adequately served with a wide range and depth of international information and knowledge, *in addition* to news, and with the capacity to engage with and participate in debate on international issues, and to connect themselves to international communities of interest
- 3WE urges the BBC to build upon and further develop the statements in *Building Public Value*, and to commit the Corporation to integrate international dimensions into all its efforts to ‘build public value’

2. About 3WE

3WE, the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project, was established in 1989 and is a coalition of the UK’s leading international charities working for development, the environment and human rights. The coalition’s aim is to secure better broadcasting on ‘matters of international significance or interest’.

Its members include: ActionAid, CAFOD, CIIR, Christian Aid, Comic Relief, Friends of the Earth, ITDG, International Broadcasting Trust, One World Broadcasting Trust, Oxfam, RSPB, Save the Children, Sightsavers International, Skillshare International, UNA-UK, UNICEF-UK, VSO, and the World Association for Christian Communication.

3WE has worked to improve Acts of Parliament, reviews of public service broadcasting and regulatory frameworks in order to protect and strengthen non-news-and-current-affairs programming on international issues. Most recently it successfully campaigned for the government to insert ‘matters of international significance or interest’ into the Communications Act as one of the ‘Tier 3’ requirements for public service broadcasting.

From 1989-90 onwards 3WE has regularly monitored the programme output of the main public service channels on international subjects. Its most recent report, ‘The World on the Box’, covered the year 2003 and was published in July 2004. A copy is enclosed with this submission.

3WE is also a steering group member of the voluntary sector coalition, Public Voice.

3. UK citizens and international information and knowledge

The direct concern of 3WE is with the availability, to UK citizens of the global information society, of information, knowledge and understanding of the wider world. The need for such information is essential and indispensable to full participation in society.

Events and processes taking place in the wider world now intimately affect all aspects of our lives: our security, economic prospects and well-being, health, education and training, our environment, and so on. Likewise, the part played by the UK in these wider events and processes is a fundamental part of the politics, economics and social policy of our own society – witness the war in Iraq, or the WTO trade talks in Cancun.

At one level the BBC itself makes this case:

“Powerful forces are reshaping the global environment. The world is increasingly unstable and has entered perhaps its most complex and unpredictable phase of the last fifty years. At the same time, people have never been more interdependent... Despite the flood of information, however, genuine insights, and genuine trust, are at a premium.”

The government also recognised this case, when, after omitting it from the draft version, it decided to include within the full communications bill a requirement for television programming on ‘matters of international significance or interest’. This complemented the requirement for ‘comprehensive’ news from the UK and ‘around the world’ that was already included.

A number of recent indicators show that people’s awareness of their need for such information is growing. For example, the annual reports from the Office of National Statistics to the Department for International Development have shown significant increases since 2001 in the numbers of people who answer yes to the propositions that global poverty has implications for our security, and that we need to understand those problems more.

Paradoxically, however, *as the need for such information grows, its availability through the most-used media consistently diminishes.*

4. International information on UK mainstream television

‘The World on the Box’, published in July 2004, was commissioned from Professor Steven Barnett at the University of Westminster, and the research and conclusions within it were produced independently from 3WE. It examines both news and non-news factual international output on the main five TV channels during 2003 and compares these to data going back to 1975 (for news) and 1989 (non-news).

The report shows that there was ‘an underlying trend of continued decline’ in factual international programming on UK public service TV, between 1989-90 and 2003. It said:

‘the amount of factual international programming on the four largest terrestrial channels was 40% lower in 2003 than in 1989-90... Factual programming about developing countries fell even more markedly. In 2003 it was 49% lower on all terrestrial TV, lower than at any other time recorded since 1989-90.... Each of the five channels recorded its lowest level of output [of developing country factual programming] in the 14 years of the study.’

It is important to note that BBC One and BBC Two followed this trend:

- BBC One showed less than 20 hours of factual programming filmed in developing countries – a level no greater than ITV1, which has previously said it is not going to contribute to this area of programming;
- BBC Two showed 63.4 hours of factual programming filmed in developing countries, a fall of nearly ten per cent since 2000-01, and one fifth of which was programming commissioned by BBC Four and repeated in the off-peak, post-Newsnight slot

Moreover, the type of international programming was seen to change over the 14 years of the study. ‘Harder’, more in depth programming on issues such as development, the environment, human rights and politics had greatly decreased, while programmes that concentrate on the adventures of British people abroad had increased (reality TV, house relocation, travel challenges, etc). Programmes that

were capable of giving ‘genuine insights’, as the BBC calls them, into the lives and concerns of the majority of the world’s people had become as scarce as protected species.

These findings on non-news programming were in marked contrast to the record in news. 2003 was a record year, compared to data since 1975, for the proportion of international stories in the main evening bulletins on the five public service channels. The three commercial channels were seen to have maintained, or slightly increased, their attention to international stories over time. The BBC One news at Six had also been consistent; while its news at Ten showed a record proportion of international news during 2003 – at 50% of all stories.

On all channels, the proportion of these international stories that came from developing countries reached record levels (on average, around half of all international stories).

The report was cautious about whether this was a trend, or a temporary response to the normal tracking of the news agenda – that is, an ‘Iraq effect’. What it did conclude was that the TV news services have positively tried to change their policy since 11th September 2001, and to track the new global agendas. It is therefore all the more disturbing that no such change has happened in the commissioning and scheduling of non-news factual programmes. Rather, the main five channels have turned their backs on the wider world, and on developing countries in particular.

While 3WE welcomes and praises the BBC for the excellence of its news coverage, this alone cannot adequately serve UK citizens. News has considerable limitations:

- News focuses on a small range of geographical locations and subject areas: the high levels of international and developing country news stories in 2003, for example, were overwhelmingly related to Iraq; and between 80% and 100% of the developing country news stories (depending on the bulletin in question) were about conflict and war
- News, especially news on unfamiliar subjects, is often poorly understood by viewers: focus group research by DFID and the BBC, examining a selection of developing country news stories, found that the viewers could not understand the basic terms even of reports that were consciously designed to be comprehensible by non-specialist audiences. The short time frame and compression of information confused the viewers.

For these reasons it is more important than ever for there to be a wide range and significant depth of non-news factual programming (as well as programming in other genres, such as drama) that is capable of providing greater geographical and subject coverage, a variety of different insights, and enough time and space for the people of other countries to explain their own lives and experiences.

On all projections, however, the commercial public service channels will further reduce their offering in the years ahead.

5. The future of international programmes on channels 3-5

The Communications Act 2003 specified a number of genres and topics which should be included within the ‘purposes’ of public service TV channels ‘taken together’. These included ‘matters of international significance or interest’ as well as other genres that have historically helped to provide coverage of international themes, such as ‘science’ and ‘religion and other faiths’.

However, the remits of channels 3, 4 and 5 were not overtly tied in to these defined ‘purposes’; and 3 and 5 in particular were given less demanding remits. 3WE predicted that this would lead to a further diminution in ‘hard’ factual programming. With the publication of Ofcom’s two reports from its review of public service television, it is clear that the regulator expects their future psb obligations to lie mainly in providing news and original UK production (as well as regional news in the case of channel 3). A clause in the draft guidelines for self-regulation of ‘Tier 3’ programmes, on which

Ofcom recently consulted, paves the way for this by noting that ‘not all channels’ will be expected to contribute in each area of the ‘purposes’ defined in the Communications Act 2003. Although Ofcom is still empowered to ensure that there are no ‘significant changes’ in the programme policies followed under self-regulation, ITV and Five have so far reduced their factual international programming that a further reduction (to zero) may not be counted as a significant change on previous years; while in any case Ofcom could only take enforcement action after being convinced that any failure to provide in this area was not ‘excused market conditions’.

We can therefore expect these two channels to become more highly commercialised and to offer less and less in-depth factual international programming. Channel 4 will, as Ofcom acknowledges, then find itself severely squeezed between the two. A model to ensure the continuation of Channel 4 as a strong public service player continues to elude both Ofcom and other policy makers. As Ofcom puts it: “we recognise that Channel 4 may find it difficult to maintain its income from advertising and still meet its PSB goals. So, it may not be able to provide the same quantity of PSB programming as it does now.”¹

Moreover, a specific licence condition, inserted into Channel 4’s licence following the Rt Hon Chris Smith’s review of its remit in 1996-97, which gave the channel an explicit responsibility to cover ‘global and international issues’, will disappear when the Digital Replacement Licence comes into force. Again, the only lever the regulator will have to ensure Channel 4 maintains its factual international programming will be the ‘significant change’ clause relating to self-regulated statements of programme policy.

As we approach the digital era, therefore, the BBC will not only be the principal broadcaster of non-news international content on public service television, it may slowly but surely become the only one.

6. Building Public Value

3WE has given the Chairman of the Governors, and senior executives at the BBC, a formal response to *Building Public Value*. This was previously e-mailed to the organisers of the Burns panel seminars and remains available on the website at www.ibt.org.uk/3WE

The Public Voice coalition, of which 3WE is a steering group member and which includes umbrella bodies for the voluntary sector such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, is currently finalising its own response to the document. The wording in this section is largely taken from that draft response, which extends and develops the initial response from 3WE.

The Overview to *BPV* notes that BBC services, ‘*uniquely, can combine personal and local relevance with connectivity to the national and global*’.

Public Voice since its inception has argued for greater internationalism in the content of public service broadcasting, because as citizens of a global information society we are now directly and intimately connected to events and processes happening at the international and global levels.

Issues such as global warming, the loss of biodiversity, the movement of epidemics, migration, terrorism and security, the transfer of jobs and services, and the imperative to prevent genocide have demonstrated clearly that ‘the global is personal’. International information, knowledge and understanding, and the capacity to connect to non-geographical communities across the world, have become essential elements in the ‘toolkit’ that UK citizens require. So has a knowledge and understanding of the UK’s role in the world.

It is unfortunate, then, that the BBC’s apparent awareness of its unique capacity to meet these needs of citizens, evidenced in the statement above and others dotted through the document, is **not reflected in the major purposes** that will guide the BBC through the next Charter.

¹ Plain English Summary to the Phase 2 report on the review of public service broadcasting TV, p11

In the five types of public value, the description of ‘democratic value’ recognises the need to help citizens ‘make sense of the world’ and to encourage them to ‘engage with it’. This appears tied particularly to the BBC’s news programming. Monitoring evidence shows that these services continue to be highly internationalised².

However, it is not adequate for news services to be the only place where international and global information is found. This would leave UK citizens with an extremely narrow range of knowledge of the wider world, given that news stories from the majority world were, in 2003, overwhelmingly about conflict and war (80% of stories), and overwhelmingly dominated by one region (Iraq)³.

Rather, we argue that democratic, cultural, educational, social and community value are now all inherently internationalised. For example, there is no longer an identifiable ‘UK national culture’ – in all forms of cultural production, we are influenced and enriched by international exchange and the contributions of cultural diasporas.

The fifth purpose, ‘global value’, should address this connectedness of UK citizens to the wider world, thereby helping to shape the other statements of public value. Disappointingly, ‘global value’ at the headline level focuses entirely on the export of communications to the rest of the world, through BBC news services and ‘by showcasing the best of British [sic] culture to a global audience’.

Unless this fifth purpose is reshaped to provide a coda to the other four purposes, Public Voice is sceptical that global and international elements will be adequately integrated into mainstream domestic BBC programmes and services for citizens in the UK. It will be an opportunity missed.

Section 2 of the Overview gives some detail on the types of programmes and services that, in the BBC’s vision, ‘build public value’. These groupings – ‘active and informed citizenship’, ‘British culture and creativity’, ‘a revolution in learning’, ‘connected communities’ and ‘the UK’s voice in the world’ – are designed to mirror the five types of public value. For each, we would question whether international content is currently integrated properly.

For example, ‘active and informed citizenship’ promises the use of ‘schedule-busting events and specials to highlight the major issues of the day’. The BBC has been piloting these types of programmes over the last two to three years in strands like ‘If...’ and in events such as NHS Day. Almost without exception these have highlighted domestic issues, not international ones. A test of the BBC’s international connectedness will be when there is a Global Warming Day, or when ‘If...’ asks what will happen when Chinese demand for oil outstrips global supply.

The category ‘British culture and creativity’ promises to ‘defy standard programme categories to open up challenging subjects to large audiences’. This is code for the use of drama and other entertainment genres to headline seasons of programmes on these ‘challenging subjects’. The examples given are ‘arts, history, science, religion and music’ – but there is no explicit reference to what the Communications Act 2003 specifies as ‘matters of international significance or interest’.

[This category also promises to ‘showcase the glories of our national culture in mainstream settings’.]

If the BBC were to follow through the statement we started with, about its unique capacity to create global connectivity, it would surely be in the section on ‘connected communities’. Yet here there is only a passing reference to using this capacity in the context of ‘major sporting and public events’. Other paragraphs in this category address issues which are inherently international, without appearing to recognise them as such. For example, one paragraph addresses the need to foster audience understanding of ‘cultural differences’ including ethnicity and faith – a key place in which connecting these debates to the wider international context is vital to full knowledge and understanding. Another

² See ‘The World on the Box’, University of Westminster for 3WE, 2004, which shows, for example, that BBC One’s Ten O’Clock News had 50% international content during 2003

³ *ibid*

speaks of reflecting Britain's diversity, including by listening to the concerns of ethnic minorities and reflecting these in the development of services.

Finally, the 'UK's voice in the world' does mention the use of the BBC's global presence 'to bring a richer international dimension to domestic programmes and to help connect the people of a multicultural UK to their international roots'. This is to be applauded, even if it is lost from the summary statement of 'global value' earlier in the document. However, *BPV* explicitly states that the main vehicle to achieve these aims will be BBC Four.

'The World on the Box' shows that, as the five terrestrial psb TV channels have reduced their international programming and diminished its depth and range, BBC Four has become the final home of the international documentary. 3WE values its role and presence in this regard, and has recommended that BBC Four should become part of the 'core services' of the BBC in the next Charter and Agreement. Nevertheless, Four is currently watched by a minimal audience – so small that the recent Barwise review of BBC digital TV stated that even on a small budget of around £50 million, it does not represent value for money. It cannot be a substitute for sustained, high quality programming on the two mainstream domestic channels. Nor should it be – in giving consent to Four the Secretary of State required that it should not undermine the offering of One and Two.

In summary, the internationalism of *BPV* is inadequate. The BBC is not following through on its awareness of its own unique capacity to provide international connectivity for UK citizens. This threatens to be a significant missed opportunity for the BBC to establish and reinforce its distinctiveness as a communications provider. More importantly, it could represent a disastrous lost opportunity for UK citizens.

7. What could the BBC be offering UK citizens in this area?

Unless the BBC's understanding of building 'global value' is further developed, this is what UK citizens will miss out on – we quote from the chapter 'The Future' in the BBC's submission to the panel:

"a global forum for dialogue and debate"

"bring[ing] individuals from different societies together for the free exchange of ideas and to develop an intelligent dialogue which transcends international borders and cultural divides"

"a Global Conversation with and for our audiences"

Should not the international resources and infrastructure of the BBC be used to provide these benefits, inter alia, to its primary audiences – those in the UK? Are we not to be part of the global conversation?

In our response to the Chairman of Governors 3WE argued that an international dimension should be an integral part of the BBC's mainstream, domestic services. We offered a few indicators of what that might mean:

- There would be a greater blurring of boundaries and distinctions in the BBC's general programming, between so-called 'domestic' and 'foreign' subject matter.
- An individual strand such as 'If...' which asks us to reflect on our society through hypothetical future scenarios, could as easily ask what will happen if, for example, China corners the world's oil surpluses just as new sources of oil are declining – dramatically raising prices and questioning our reliance on fossil fuel technologies. Yet 'If...' is currently defined as a domestic strand.

- BBC One should not be defined as ‘mainly domestic’ – that is, as mainly excluding ‘foreign’ subject matter, but should equally be capable of showing a landmark programme about the global environment or a drama set in a developing country.
- Popular phone-in programmes such as those on Radio 5 Live could link in to global issues and audiences in just the same way as the BBC sees the World Service creating a ‘global conversation’

8. Recent BBC initiatives

To the credit of the BBC, it remains consistently willing to review its programme policies and to engage in dialogue with groups like 3WE.

On the positive side we note and welcome the following recent initiatives:

- A dialogue with 3WE on the results of our monitoring research has been maintained for the last three years
- In May 2004 as a result of this dialogue the BBC held a high level, full day seminar attended by senior executive staff (including two directors and three channel controllers, as well as heads of programme departments) intended to change its thinking about what is going on in the wider world
- As a follow-up, a residential seminar in September 2004 sought to generate innovative new programme ideas resulting from those changed horizons
- Meanwhile, the governors have required each channel and service, in its programme policy statement for 2004-05, to state its approach to international content and themes
- Finally, there is evidence of some changes in commissioning policy with, for example, the first factual international series on BBC Three (it showed virtually no factual international programmes in 2003); the initiation of the Real World strand on BBC Two; and a planned Africa season across channels in 2005

With this dawning awareness of the importance of international dimensions to fulfilling its public service role, and of the ‘unique capacity’ of the ‘tri-media’ offer to develop deeper engagement with audiences on international topics, it would be all the greater shame if a lack of emphasis on integrating internationalism within the Charter renewal process caused future failures to deliver to the BBC’s highest potential.

9. Recommendations

3WE urges the panel, the dcms and the Secretary of State to re-examine the terms of the debate on the BBC’s international role. This should not be seen as mainly a matter of exporting values and content to the rest of the world, but also of using the BBC’s unique international and tri-media capacity to equip UK citizens to understand and engage with the rest of the world.

3WE recommends that, within the Green Paper, the BBC should be expected to establish an international strategy across all of its mainstream domestic services. Such

a strategy should, as far as possible, seek to guarantee that UK citizens are adequately served with a wide range and depth of international information and knowledge, *in addition* to news, and with the capacity to engage with and participate in debate on international issues, and to connect themselves to international communities of interest.

3WE urges the BBC to build upon and further develop the statements in *Building Public Value*, and to commit the Corporation -- across all of its mainstream, domestic services -- to integrating international dimensions into its efforts to 'build public value'.