

RESPONSE BY IBT (THE INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING TRUST) TO THE BBC TRUST'S SERVICE REVIEW OF BBC 1, 2, 4 AND BBC RED BUTTON

December 2009

INTRODUCTION

We believe that the output of BBC One, Two and Four, as a whole, has great strengths and, for the most part, successfully engages audiences across a range of genres. (We shall not be addressing the Red Button service in this submission as it falls outside our range of expertise).

However, we are concerned that in some areas of television output there is a lack of ambition and a need for greater risk taking. As a result, we believe that BBC One and Two are not achieving the purpose remit 'bringing the world to the UK' as effectively as they could.

We are also concerned that, because BBC Four is widely seen by programme makers and commissioners as the home of international content, there is a real danger that BBC Four is super serving a small proportion of the television audience that already has access to a range of sources of information about the world, whilst a bigger, more mainstream audience which doesn't have access to such information is under served. We would like to see BBC One and Two take more risks by broadcasting a wider range of programmes which help to inform a mass audience about what is happening in the world.

We believe it's vital that international content is not just restricted to news and current affairs. Our own audience research published in *The World in Focus* in June 2009 found that many viewers who do not watch news and current affairs output would nevertheless be interested in international stories in other genres for example drama, factual entertainment and documentaries.

We live in an interconnected world and we believe that BBC One and Two with their ability to reach mass audiences have an important role to play in helping UK citizens to make sense of the world and to learn about the lives of people in other countries. If the UK is to develop and reach its full economic potential we need a population of global citizens, who are well informed about the world.

IBT RESEARCH – THE WORLD IN FOCUS

In June 2009, we published a new piece of research, *The World in Focus*. Our aim was to explore exactly how audiences engage with television content about the wider world, across a range of genres. We found that news and current affairs were the dominant sources of information about the world outside the UK and that, as a result of their focus on wars, conflicts and disasters, UK audiences had a very distorted view of the world, and particularly of developing countries. As the report noted: *Participants commented on how television coverage of developing countries was 'all picturesque safari or doom and gloom'. The dominance of news and 'charity appeal' TV reinforces a particular stereotype of developing countries dominated by disaster and extreme poverty in which little appears to change.*

This has led viewers to see all programmes about developing countries as 'worthy' or 'difficult viewing'.

We believe there is an urgent need to redress this balance and present a wider range of stories on mainstream channels with a conscious effort to move away from the negative. The key to doing this is commissioning content outside of news and current affairs, particularly on mainstream channels like BBC One and Two. We appreciate that this involves risks and we would encourage the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive to give thought to how commissioners might be encouraged to take more risks in this area. *The World in Focus* noted that there were some international programmes which successfully appealed to mass audiences for example *Amazon with Bruce Parry* (BBC Two) and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (BBC One).

We recognise that television drama with its high budgets is a particular challenge but it is noteworthy that feature films with international storylines – like *Slumdog Millionaire* - have been hugely successful. *The World in Focus* noted that: *Participants reflected on how feature films and literary fiction set in developing countries had the ability to change their perceptions and enhance understanding but television drama had failed to realise this potential.*

The report also found that there were factual entertainment formats which successfully highlighted international stories and issues and also gave an insight into the day to day lives of people in other countries but these were not to be found on the BBC's mainstream channels. *Blood Sweat and T-shirts* (BBC Three) is a notable example and clearly one of the functions of BBC Three is to take risks in trying out new formats but it is surprising, given the success of this programme, that neither BBC One nor BBC Two has managed to find a successful factual entertainment format of its own, dealing with international themes.

The World in Focus audience research found that drama and factual entertainment programmes appealed to audiences who don't watch news and current affairs and therefore offered them a way of finding out about events and day to day life in other countries.

The World in Focus report also included some more detailed research on news which is relevant to this submission. Whilst we recognise that this review concerns the whole output of BBC One, Two and Four and not specifically news, we believe that news plays such an important role in BBC One's output that it is worthy of special attention. Despite the substantial growth in internet use, television news remains the main source of information about the wider world for most people in the UK.

The World in Focus presented the findings of a two week quantitative analysis of international news in the UK, across tv, radio and online, and found that whilst there was much to celebrate about the quantity and quality of international news available to UK audiences, there were several areas of concern.

BBC One's *Ten O'clock News* was singled out for praise as it contained the highest percentage of international news (48%), international lead stories (38%) and coverage of developing countries (47%). This is a significant achievement for a bulletin that at the same time remains the most watched news bulletin in the UK. It was also one of the few bulletins during the sample period (February 2009) to give significant coverage to the impact of the financial crisis around the world and to make connections between the wider world and the UK, putting the story into an international context.

However, ***The World in Focus*** also provides evidence that BBC news bulletins, like all the main UK news bulletins, have a strong tendency to cover the same, relatively narrow, international agenda in terms of topics, countries and original stories. In the two weeks of the study, 53% of all international coverage on the main bulletins concerned just three countries (USA, Australia and Israel).

It is worth noting that Sky News' 10pm bulletin had a significantly wider range of international news stories than the BBC's *Ten O'clock News*. It appears that the decision by BBC News to report fewer stories has narrowed the range of international stories which reach the screen. This is a worrying trend and, given the significant influence of television news on UK audiences, will inevitably lead to a more insular world view.

IBT RESEARCH – SCREENING THE WORLD

In June 2008, we published *Screening the World*. For twenty years we have been tracking the international content of factual programming on UK television. The results of this unique longitudinal study are published every two years. Our most recent results were published as part of this report. It found that: *The longitudinal element of this research reveals some striking trends. International factual programming on the four main terrestrial channels has now reached its lowest overall level since 1989-90. The increasing levels of output on BBC 3, BBC 4 and More 4 point to the migration of international factual content to digital channels.*

This reinforces our concern, mentioned at the beginning of this submission, that there is a real danger that the BBC is super serving the BBC Four audience and under serving other audiences. *The World in Focus* audience research found that many viewers had never watched BBC Four, and they were unaware of what was on the channel.

The *Screening the World* research also found that there is a tendency for commissioners to play safe when commissioning international content, and this led the report to conclude that there is a need for greater risk taking. The report provides evidence which demonstrates that the information we receive on television about the world outside the UK is oversimplified and reinforces stereotypes, rather than increasing our understanding: It noted, looking at non-news factual programming as a whole, that: *Africa receives relatively little coverage and is dominated by wildlife programming whereas the Middle East is dominated by conflict and disaster programming. Europe and North*

America together make up 47% of all international factual output and are characterised by high levels of travel and crime programming respectively. There is a need for commissioners to think more strategically about commissioning content which does not reinforce stereotypes, but rather presents a more rounded view of life in other parts of the world.

BBC PURPOSE REMITS

While we recognise that the six public purposes should not be seen as entirely separate aims but as parts of a whole, whose boundaries necessarily overlap, in this submission we primarily focus on the delivery of the purpose remit, 'bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK' since this is IBT's area of expertise.

We believe the key to achieving this remit successfully is to have international themes and stories across a range of genres and across all channels. We recognise that different viewers watch different channels; some watch news and current affairs; others watch drama or factual entertainment. We would like to see all audiences, regardless of which genres they watch, having access to information about the wider world. This ambition is well expressed in the in the annexe to the purpose remit which states that: *...a public service imperative for the BBC [should be] to make UK audiences aware of international issues, cultures and viewpoints. This should be achieved through the provision of engaging content across a wide range of genres and across all BBC platforms.*

SERVICE LICENCES

It is clear from the language used in the service licences that there is a hierarchy of purposes for each licence with some being considered more important than others. The 'bringing the world to the UK' purpose is no exception. The BBC Four licence notes that *BBC Four should make a very important contribution to this purpose.* Whereas the BBC One licence notes that *BBC One should play its part in contributing to this purpose.* The BBC Two licence notes that *BBC Two should play its part in contributing to this purpose.*

This wording is of serious concern to us. We believe that both BBC One and BBC Two, in their different ways, already make an important contribution to achieving this purpose and we would like to see this contribution reflected in the wording of their licences. Therefore, we would urge the BBC Trust in its Review to recommend that both the BBC One and BBC Two licences are amended so that the two channels both 'make an important contribution to this purpose.'

This may seem pedantic but in fact the wording sends out an important message that international content is an important part of the output of BBC One and BBC Two. This also reflects the status quo and signals the BBC's ambition that appropriate international content should be available to all audiences. It is ironic that the channel which is currently asked to prioritise international content, BBC Four, is the channel which is aimed at an audience which already has access to a considerable amount of information about the wider world. There is a real danger that a gulf is developing between a minority of UK citizens who are well informed about life in other countries and the majority who are ill informed.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS POSED IN THE CONSULTATION

How well are BBC One, BBC Two and BBC Four performing against the terms of their services licences?

BBC One

We believe that, overall, BBC One is performing well against its remit *to be the BBC's most popular mixed-genre television service across the UK, offering a wide range of high quality programmes.*

However, we believe more thought needs to be given about the range of programming which features international themes. At the moment, we feel that this is largely limited to news and current affairs, with one or two notable exceptions.

We would encourage the BBC Trust to recommend that more risks are taken in the output on BBC One. We note that the service licence states that *BBC One should be the BBC's main platform for television drama and, especially in peak time, drama should be one of the biggest creators of BBC's One's impact with its audience.* We believe drama with international themes and story lines, is a key area where BBC One could show more ambition.

The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency is a good example of a series which marked BBC One out for its ambition and its willingness to try something new. No other UK broadcaster had previously broadcast a prime time drama where all the protagonists were black. We would like to see BBC One commission more international drama. When we conducted our audience research for *The World in Focus* we found that *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* stood out and made a real impact on audiences. We are pleased to see that BBC One is continuing to commission drama with international themes, with the recently broadcast *Small Island*.

The World in Focus audience research demonstrated the significant impact which television news has on UK audiences and their perceptions of the wider world. We note that the BBC One licence states that *BBC One should be the BBC's most significant provider of accurate, impartial and independent television news, with comprehensive news bulletins in peak time.* Our research singled out BBC One's *Ten O'clock News* for praise, as has been mentioned in the introduction to this submission. It is notable that this bulletin has both maintained its position as the most popular news bulletin on UK television and has also maintained its mix of international and domestic stories. However, we would like to see this bulletin widen the range of international stories which it covers by including more off-agenda stories which present an antidote to the relentlessly negative stream of news items which emanate from developing countries. *The World in Focus* noted that this constant diet of stories about conflict and disaster created an obstacle for viewers and put them off watching all programming about the developing world. Some viewers even noted that when they watched *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* they found it hard to believe that life was really like this in Africa, as it was so different from all that they had heard about Africa on the television news. We believe that BBC One, as the BBC's most popular

television service, has a responsibility to present a more varied diet of international stories on its main news bulletins.

BBC Two

We believe that, overall, BBC Two is fulfilling its remit *to be a mixed-genre channel appealing to a broad adult audience with programmes of depth and substance.*

In our view, factual programming is a particular strength of BBC Two and the channel has made significant efforts to commission a wide range of international programming designed to appeal to a variety of tastes, with a number of series which stand out for their ambition and innovative approach including *Around the World in 80 Faiths* and *Explore*.

However, we believe there are two specific areas in which BBC Two could improve its international coverage. The first is its international documentary strand, *This World*. This should be a stand out series in a prime time slot, a real appointment to view at the heart of the BBC Two schedule. Instead, it is a neglected and under resourced strand which is lost in the schedule. There have been some outstanding documentaries in the series such as the recent *An Iranian Martyr* but few viewers know where to find this series and therefore it is simply not having the audience impact which it should have. We have noted earlier in this submission the importance of international content across a range of genres so that viewers are able to experience how people in other countries lead their lives. Documentaries have the potential to deliver this experience to a mass audience yet *This World* is clearly not doing so. When we look back on 2009 and pick out the most memorable international documentaries on British television, we think of titles like *Afghan Star*, *Which Way Home?*, *Dancing with the Devil* and *Pray the Devil back to Hell*. These were documentaries that brought home the real experience of people living in other countries, yet they were all shown on Channel 4 or More4. Judgements about quality are inevitably subjective but it is our view that the problem of *This World* needs serious and urgent attention. We believe the BBC Trust in its Review of BBC Two should highlight the importance of *This World* being given a regular prime time slot so that viewers know where to find it and the resources to deliver some outstanding programmes. We also believe that *This World* should be a true documentary strand rather than the current mix which sits uncomfortably between documentaries and current affairs, and that its brief should be to bring home to a British audience the real experience of people living in other parts of the world.

We note that the BBC Two remit states that *the channel should work with BBC Four in order to maximise the impact of some of its programming, in particular in factual and the arts.* There's no reason why, given the close relationship between the two channels, that *This World* couldn't also be the home for some of the best of BBC Four's international documentaries, like *Rageh in Iran*. When we showed this BBC Four documentary to audiences taking part in *The World in Focus* research, they praised it for presenting a fresh perspective on life in Iran but said they would not have found it on BBC Four.

Our second area of concern is the range of international stories which feature on *Newsnight* and the way in which this programme delivers the purpose remit 'bringing the world to the UK.' The BBC Two licence notes that *BBC*

Two should contribute to this purpose amongst its audience, primarily by bringing the world to the UK, by following a broad international agenda in its current affairs and by regularly covering international stories in its news analysis.

We are concerned that there are severe constraints on *Newsnight's* ability to deliver a range of distinctive international stories. There is no doubt that in the past this has been a particular strength of *Newsnight*. There continue to be examples of distinctive and impactful reporting like the recent report from Lyse Doucet on maternal mortality in Afghanistan which was superb. However, we are concerned that there are few opportunities now for these potentially agenda-setting international stories to break through. We believe that budget cuts and the need to secure all rights have severely limited the ability of independent producers to make short films abroad for *Newsnight* for the money which is available. We would like to see a special ring-fenced fund set up so that independent producers can continue to make international reports for *Newsnight* and other news programmes. There is a real danger that this is a skill set which is being lost in the independent sector, yet independent producers have the ability to find stories which broaden the news agenda.

BBC Four

We believe that BBC Four is meeting its remit *to be a mixed-genre television channel for all adults offering an ambitious range of innovative, high quality output that is intellectually and culturally enriching*. A particular strength of BBC Four's output is its international documentary strand, *Storyville* which has included many superb films including *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *The Children's Ward*. It has also been responsible for playing a leading role in a number of innovative partnerships including the *Why Democracy?* project. We believe that these partnerships are of great value and by working with other broadcasters and film makers from around the world, that the BBC is able to offer a range of new perspectives on contemporary issues. We warmly welcome *Storyville's* latest venture, its planned *Why Poverty? Why the Gap?* project. BBC Four has also been widely praised for its seasons including one on Japan. There is little doubt that BBC Four has internationalism at the heart of its vision. We have no quibble with that. Our concern, already expressed in this submission is that BBC Four is so strongly identified in the minds of commissioners and producers as 'the international channel' that, as a result of this, other channels are not placing internationalism at the heart of their visions.

To what extent are licence fee payers aware of and using the services, and are some demographic groups better served than others?

It is our view that the 'bringing the world to the UK' purpose remit applies to all audiences and therefore that there should be some programmes with international content which appeal to everyone. Our audience research published in *The World in Focus* in June 2009 has raised concerns that there are some viewers who are getting very little exposure to programmes with international themes. The audience can be divided into two groups. The first has a natural interest in international stories and a desire to find out what is

happening in the world. These viewers tend to watch news and current affairs and documentaries and, for the most part, are well served by the BBC's television services. However, there is a larger second group which has little instinctive interest in international content. This group tends to watch drama series and serials and entertainment. We believe that BBC One and Two need to give more thought to commissioning international content aimed at these viewers. This inevitably involves taking risks but there are some programmes which do succeed in breaking through, for example factual entertainment formats like *Amazon with Bruce Parry* (BBC Two). In order to appeal to this group, programmes need to make connections that enable audiences to relate to the wider world. This is a major challenge for the BBC but we believe it is essential that this issue is addressed, if we are to avoid the growing gulf between the sector of the audience which is well informed and the sector which has little or no immediate interest.

Are the services delivering high quality and distinctive content across the full range of television genres?

We believe that there is much to celebrate in the range and quality of BBC output on BBC One, Two and Four. However, as noted earlier in this submission, we believe there are several specific issues which need to be addressed in the following genres:

Drama – we would like to see more distinctive output which deals with a wide range of international stories and themes enabling viewers to make connections with the lives of people in other countries.

Factual entertainment – we would like to see BBC One and Two taking more risks and pioneering international formats of their own in the way in which BBC Three has grown a number of innovative formats which make connections for British viewers with what is happening in other countries, such as *Blood, Sweat and T-shirts* and *The World's Strictest Parents*.

News – we are concerned that news bulletins report a narrow range of international stories, as noted in *The World in Focus* research. We would like to see news editors and producers make more effort to make BBC news output distinctive by reporting international stories which may be off the immediate news agenda.

News analysis programmes – we are concerned that the strength of these programmes lies in their domestic coverage and would like to see special efforts made to encourage ambition and innovation in their international coverage, by the setting up of a special fund for independent producers to make international films which can be shown on *Newsnight* and on other news programmes.

Are the services making an effective contribution to delivering the BBC's public purposes?

As noted earlier in this submission, there is much to be applauded in the BBC's delivery of the 'bringing the world to the UK' purpose but there are specific areas of weakness:

We believe that on BBC One and Two the global purpose is mainly interpreted as falling within the responsibility of news and current affairs. If the BBC is to be distinctive in delivering this purpose then more thought needs to be given to the best way to incorporate international themes and stories across all genres. This ambition is clearly articulated in the annexe to the purpose remit which we have already quoted in this submission.

Are the services delivering good value for money?

We believe that, on the whole, these television services offer good value for money.

Are BBC One, BBC Two and BBC Four equipped to deliver their service licence commitments in the future, in particular to meet audience expectations of high quality and distinctive content?

We believe that these services have the means to deliver their licence commitments provided that some of the issues raised in this submission are addressed.

Do the services have appropriate strategies in place?

At the moment we do not consider that BBC One and Two have appropriate strategies for the delivery of the 'bringing the world to the UK' purpose. Our view is that more thought needs to be given to formulating a strategy so that these services broadcast appropriate content across a range of genres so that all audiences are catered for, not just those who have already demonstrated a keen interest in watching international content.

Are resources appropriately allocated to meet objectives?

As stated earlier in this submission, we do not believe that resources have been appropriately allocated, and we would like to see more resources devoted to drama and factual entertainment programmes with international themes and a special fund set up for independent film makers to make short international films for *Newsnight* and other news programmes.

Should the service licences for BBC One, BBC Two and BBC Four be changed?

We would like to see the BBC One licence amended so that instead of the current wording, under the heading 'Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK', which reads *BBC One should play its part in contributing to this purpose* the licence should instead read *BBC One should make an important contribution to this purpose*.

Likewise, under the same heading, the BBC Two licence states that *BBC Two should contribute to this purpose*. We would propose that the wording be changed so that it reads *BBC Two should make an important contribution to this purpose*.

We believe that, unless these changes are made, the whole broadcast community will continue to believe that this purpose is largely the responsibility of BBC Four, whereas, far more programmes across the

schedule and across a range of genres need to have international themes so that television truly reflects the globalised world in which we all live and enables all viewers, regardless of which types of programmes they watch, to become global citizens. There is a real danger that we are promoting a lasting division in our society, with a well informed elite having access to high quality programming about the wider world on BBC Four and an less well informed majority having little or no access to information about life in other countries.

Background: About IBT

IBT (International Broadcasting Trust) is an amalgamation of two sister organisations: the former Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project (3WE) and the former International Broadcasting Trust (IBT). The new IBT is a charity which seeks to promote high quality television and new media coverage of matters of international significance. In the past, 3WE has been active in this area and this submission fully reflects 3WE's long history of campaigning on these issues and arguing that international coverage on television is a necessary tool in informing us all, as global citizens.

IBT represents a coalition of international charities. Its members include: ActionAid, Amnesty International, British Red Cross, CAFOD, Care International UK, Christian Aid, Comic Relief, Concern Worldwide (UK), Friends of the Earth, Help the Aged, HelpAge International, Malaria Consortium, Merlin, MSF, ONE, Oxfam, Plan International UK, Practical Action, Progressio, Save the Children, Sightsavers International, Tearfund, TVE, UNICEF UK, VSO, WaterAid and World Vision.

IBT is a registered charity, number 326150.

The views in this submission reflect the concerns of IBT's member agencies regarding adequate common understanding of the world in which we live. These concerns are shared by millions of UK supporters of these organisations. IBT's members, being intimately and operationally concerned with the effects of 'globalisation' on communities and environments around the world, and with communicating across the world, welcome the advent of the global information society.

IBT's position, reflected in all our policy work since 1997, is that television coverage of the developing world should not just focus on images of suffering which is more often than not what is presented in news coverage. It is IBT's view that an international dimension should be an integral part of all programming.

PLEASE PRINT AND SIGN THIS DECLARATION ALONGSIDE OF YOUR RESPONSE.

If you would prefer that all or part of your response is treated as confidential, please complete the confidentiality section below.

What do you want the BBC Trust to keep confidential?

Nothing X

Whole response

Part of it [please indicate which part]

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