

IBT RESPONSE TO BBC's *Delivering Quality First*

Introduction

IBT's expertise lies in analysis of content which tells us about the world outside the UK in the media, most especially television, so we will limit our comments largely to television output on the BBC for the purposes of this submission.

IBT welcomes this opportunity to respond to the BBC's *Delivering Quality First* proposal.

IBT understands the financial constraints the BBC is under and all comments made in this submission are made in that context.

We welcome the BBC Trust's commitment to the two priorities to increase distinctiveness and serve all parts of the audience.

We note that the BBC Trust sees the need for BBC Management to work up *robust, detailed delivery plans*¹ and IBT is reassured that the BBC Trust states that it will regularly assess whether the quality of content is being compromised by the *Delivering Quality First* process. While we acknowledge that comprehensive details could not be included in the *Delivering Quality First* proposal, we were frustrated by the lack of detail in the proposal because in many instances it is impossible to understand the practical implications of the proposal.

We look forward to the regular progress reports promised by the BBC Trust.

Summary

Serving All Audiences: News is a genre which delivers the greatest value to large parts of the audience. We strongly oppose the proposal for core and breaking news stories to be prioritised on the News Channel. Under the *Delivering Quality First* proposal the range and depth of news covered will be diminished at a time when IBT's research shows the news agenda is already narrowing.

Distinctiveness: It is IBT's view that the BBC will only retain its distinctiveness if it remains ambitious, innovative and imaginative. These characteristics are likely to be eroded with lower budgets and an

¹ Delivering Quality First, page 36

increasingly competitive marketplace. We urge the BBC to safeguard the ambitions set out in its public purposes to provide viewers with a range of engaging programmes which provide us with a window on the world.

News programming inherently tends to focus on disasters and negative events rather than the everyday life of people in other countries to which we can relate. Drama, documentary, lifestyle and current affairs programming can all provide an alternative view of how people live in other countries. Broadcasting such non-news international content is one way in which the BBC can be truly **distinctive** and which we feel is being overlooked. According to IBT's research the amount of non-news international programming on BBC1 and BBC2 has significantly declined in recent years.² We urge the BBC Trust to review delivery of the global purpose to mainstream audiences in light of IBT's findings and put in place safeguards to prevent the international vision of the BBC being further eroded.

Newsgathering: The quality of news is essential to maintain public trust in the BBC. We largely welcome the changes to the BBC's newsgathering operation but we fear that the upheaval of the transformation at the World Service and BBC News will be disruptive and needs very careful managing. The future of BBC news is dependent on this merger yet it is quite unclear how it will work in a practical sense because no information has been made available by the BBC or the BBC Trust on the process of transformation.

International Current Affairs on BBC2: We welcome the announcement that there will be more international news and current affairs programmes at lunchtime on BBC2. We hope this change will result in a better balance between international and domestic current affairs on the BBC. However, we would like more detail about exactly what this programming will consist of.

Drama and Comedy: We understand the *Delivering Quality First* proposal to be protecting and prioritising only UK-based drama and comedy. If this is the case we identify a missed opportunity for the BBC to be **distinctive** in broadcasting drama from other parts of the world which deliver the global purpose and which can engage different audiences from those who watch news and current affairs.

BBC3: We urge BBC3 to continue producing its distinctive and successful current affairs programming such as the *Blood, Sweat and ...* series, *Stacey Dooley Investigates*, *Women*, *Weddings*, *War and Me*. These programmes have engaged a new, younger audience with foreign affairs and the lives of people outside the UK in an imaginative and innovative way. They contribute greatly to the distinctiveness of the BBC.

Training: IBT would like more information about the future of training and development of staff within the BBC. Training is not mentioned in the

² Outside the Box, IBT, 2011

proposal and, with morale of staff low, it is one of the few ways in which the BBC can mitigate the impact of the *Delivering Quality First* process on those who are affected. It is also essential in order for World Service journalists to play a full role in the new merged news operation.

QUESTION 1:

Do you think at a broad level that this approach, which seeks to meet the new financial settlement by applying different levels of savings to each service (as outlined in the table above), is the right one and in particular will meet our aims to:

- **promote distinctiveness and serve all audiences**
- **protect the services that deliver the greatest value to large parts of the audience; and while seeking to avoid service closures if possible sees the BBC's smaller and newer services more as complementary and supporting parts of the TV and radio portfolios**
- **protect the BBC's five editorial priorities by applying greater savings in those areas which fall outside these areas**

We cannot agree fully that this approach is the right one because there is not enough detail in the *Delivering Quality First* proposal to ensure that the changes will be implemented in such a way to ensure quality and diversity of content.

We note the comment by the Chairman that *‘the major news stories of the past year have highlighted again the importance of the BBC providing an independent source of information and a public space for arguing and debating the future.’*³ We welcome the sentiment in this statement and sincerely hope that the *Delivering Quality First* cuts will not in any way undermine the role of the BBC as laid out in his comment.

Serve All Audiences: News is a genre which delivers the greatest value to large parts of the audience. It is cited by Ofcom as the most important aspect of public service broadcasting. 75% of respondents in the 2010 Ofcom PSB Review cite television as their main source of world news⁴. It is essential that, whatever happens in the coming 4 years up until Charter renewal, the BBC ensures its news retains the public's trust through its high quality, impartiality and breadth.

Distinctiveness: It is IBT's view that the BBC will only retain its distinctiveness if it remains ambitious, innovative and imaginative. These characteristics are likely to be eroded with lower budgets and an increasingly competitive marketplace. It is the BBC Trust's responsibility to ensure that the BBC retains its distinctiveness through regular reviews of the delivery of the public purposes and the *Delivering Quality First* process.

³ *Delivering Quality First*, page 1

⁴ *Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, television: Ofcom (2010)*.

QUESTION 2:

Bearing in mind our ambition to increase the distinctiveness of BBC services and serve all audiences, and in light of the need to make savings, we would like your views on the proposals affecting the BBC's:

2.1 Television channels

The News Channel

IBT is delighted that the BBC defines the bedrock of its journalism as '*the standards, breadth and timeliness of its news*'⁵. However, IBT believes that a balance is required between breadth and timeliness and that one should not outweigh the other. On this basis we strongly oppose the proposal for core and breaking news stories being the priority for the News Channel. Under this plan the breadth and depth of the news covered will be diminished.

IBT's research shows that the number of stories in bulletins have been reduced and there is a narrowing of the news agenda. In *The World in Focus*⁶ report two weeks of news output across all the public service broadcasters and other channels were analysed and the content was found to be homogenous:

*The research shows that while 61 different countries were covered over the two week period, over half (53%) of all international coverage on the main UK bulletins featured just three countries (USA, Australia and Israel). The results in Figure 3 show that 75% of international news on these bulletins covered just five topics (politics, economics, violence, disasters, law and order). Among the topics receiving almost no coverage were: environment (2%), science (2%), serious human interest (0.4%), health (0.2%), education (0.2%), international development (0.1%), religion (0.1%) and weather (0.1%). Of the main UK bulletins, only Sky News (10pm newshour) had more than five unique international stories (ones not covered by any other bulletin) during the fortnight we covered.*⁷

During the two week period of the study the BBC 6 o'clock news covered 17 countries but transmitted no unique original stories. The 10'clock bulletin covered 22 countries with 3 unique original stories. Notably, the *World Tonight* on Radio 4 covered 28 countries with 9 original stories.

In light of IBT's research we oppose the planned proposal for the News Channel to focus on breaking news and encourage the BBC to use this opportunity to increase the diversity and range of the stories it covers – features, off-agenda and international news should all be maintained.

⁵ Delivering Quality First, page 21

⁶ The World in Focus, IBT, 2008

⁷ The World in Focus, IBT, 2008

We all know that journalists are keen to break stories first but this instinct needs to be balanced with in-depth stories which provide context, both domestic and international. The BBC should provide reports from places other broadcasters cannot and determine the news agenda, rather than slavishly following breaking stories and being essentially reactive. There is an opportunity here to provide depth on the News Channel which isn't possible on the main bulletins.

Newsgathering

Having consulted with staff at the BBC we broadly understand the details of the plans for foreign newsgathering to be as follows:

- The closure of the bureau in Colombo, Sri Lanka
- All other bureaux will remain open but with staff on local contracts rather than them being freelance
- Some correspondents will retain their full overseas packages

The potential benefits of these changes are that there will be more diversity on screen, that we will often hear from a reporter who originates from the foreign location, and that the tone of reporting will change to be more reflective of local issues abroad. World Service staff will be able to provide skills and knowledge which are invaluable. We therefore welcome these ambitions and encourage the BBC to ensure that the training of World Service journalists is thorough enough for them to be able to contribute fully to the BBC merged news operation.

On the negative side, it has been admitted by BBC staff that there is a risk that local journalists will be more vulnerable to bullying by their governments than UK journalists. We understand the BBC is aware of this risk and will consider it when making appointments.

We largely welcome these changes to the BBC's newsgathering operation but we fear that the upheaval of the transformation which is to come at the World Service and BBC News will be disruptive and need very careful managing. The success of the future of BBC journalism within the *Delivering Quality First* proposal relies heavily on this merger working, yet having canvassed opinions from across the BBC and World Service we are as yet to be convinced that this merger process will be successful.

There are two very different cultures at play in these organisations: the World Service is well known for the range and depth of its coverage whereas BBC News tends to put resources into the big breaking stories and covers less off-agenda stories. We sincerely hope that the merging of the World Service and BBC News will mean a culture shift towards greater range and depth of coverage, but the *Delivering Quality First* proposal implies the opposite. We urge the BBC Trust to address this issue and overturn the plan for BBC News to focus on breaking stories in favour of more depth and breadth.

Reinvestment

We welcome the plan to reinvest funding into newsgathering in core global priority areas and into investigations for *Panorama*.

International Current Affairs on BBC2

We welcome the announcement that there will be more international news and current affairs programmes at lunchtime on BBC2. We hope this change will result in a better balance between international and domestic output on the mainstream BBC. However, we would like more detail about what this programming will comprise.

IBT's most recent research in *Outside the Box*⁸ demonstrates that coverage of the wider world in non-news programming is on the decline on BBC1 and BBC2 in terms of the number of hours broadcast⁹. There was an increase in output on BBC3 and BBC4 but these channels attract far smaller, niche audiences. Additionally the *Outside the Box* research shows that programmes across terrestrial broadcasters and Sky covered almost the same countries in both 2007 and 2010.

The regions of the world which receive the most coverage are North America (28%) and Europe (25%). The Middle East and North Africa (5%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (6%) receive the least coverage. While this concentration of international coverage on certain regions of the world may be of concern to some people, it should not come as a surprise because it is almost identical to the pattern of coverage noted in previous research. North America, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa all received exactly the same percentage of international factual coverage in 2007 as they did in 2010. Given the recent dramatic political changes in the region, perhaps the most significant lack of coverage is for countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Egypt and Tunisia did receive some coverage but Algeria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were not the main focus of a single factual programme.

Drama and comedy

As IBT has stated in previous submissions to the BBC Trust, drama is one of the genres whereby the BBC's global purpose can be most effectively delivered.

We understand from the way in which this section of the *Delivering Quality First* proposal is written¹⁰ that it is only UK-based drama and comedy which is being protected and prioritised and if this is the case we identify a missed opportunity for the BBC to be distinctive.

Coverage of the wider world tends to be of disaster-heavy news and it is only through other genres, such as drama and children's programming,

⁸ *Outside the Box*, IBT, 2011

⁹ *Outside the Box*, IBT, 2011 – international coverage on BBC2 declined by 56% since 2005 and on BBC1 by more than 30% since 2005.

¹⁰ *Delivering Quality First*, page 22

that the public have an opportunity to see a balanced view of how people live elsewhere when there isn't an earthquake or political uprising to face. This is one way in which the BBC can be truly **distinctive** by providing otherwise unseen stories from elsewhere in the world through drama.

IBT believes it is the BBC's responsibility, as the cornerstone of British public service broadcasting, to provide this alternative window on the world through content which isn't always negative or sensational. It also attracts a different audience from that which watches news and current affairs, thus providing the opportunity to engage a wider audience with international issues.

BBC Three

IBT accepts the realism of the strategy to align BBC3 so that it acts as a place to develop talent and content for BBC One. However, IBT would urge BBC3 to continue producing its distinctive and successful current affairs programming such as the *Blood, Sweat and ...* series, *Stacey Dooley Investigates*, *Women*, *Weddings*, *War and Me*. These programmes have engaged a new, younger audience with foreign affairs and the lives of people outside the UK in an imaginative and innovative way. They are not only notable for their original approach but also for their wide appeal, many of them having been moved onto BBC1 after first transmission on BBC3. They make a very significant contribution to the BBC's global purpose and we would urge the BBC to continue with such programming.

2.2 Radio stations

Radio 4 – IBT wants to highlight the important role *The World Tonight* plays in providing intelligent foreign affairs on Radio 4. This programme is not mentioned in *Delivering Quality First* proposal and we would like to highlight the important contribution it makes to the global purpose and encourage the BBC to maintain its budget so that it can continue to provide its unique service.

2.4 Digital output

We welcome the ambition for the BBC to be ready *to partner with others to build a shared digital public space*¹¹ and would welcome more detail on this proposition.

IBT welcomes the ambition for digital curation – *using editorial, social and personal tools to make the most of content, bring audiences more of what they like, and increase their engagement and participation with the BBC*.¹² IBT believes that there is potential for the BBC to increase its engagement with the audience via its online offering.

¹¹ Delivering Quality First page 6

¹² Delivering Quality First page 52

We also urge the BBC to fulfil its goal *to make the most of ..networks off bbc.co.uk, extend the reach of content, engage with new audiences*¹³. There is huge potential for the BBC to connect to a ‘web’ of sites outside the BBC to increase audience engagement and information takeaway.

Recommendations

- In order mitigate the loss of CBeebies and CBBC on BBC1 and BBC2, the BBC could cross promote these digital channels on the main channels at key times when children may be watching.
- IBT recommends that the BBC Trust should ensure that BBC News continues to provide breadth, range and depth of coverage and does not follow the plan to prioritise core and breaking news. BBC news should cover off-agenda stories with an ambition to be proactive rather than reactive.
- The BBC Trust should investigate the feasibility of devising mechanisms whereby it is possible to determine whether quality is being maintained. This will be crucial for the BBC in the run up to Charter Renewal, especially in news. We look forward to the regular progress reports promised by the BBC Trust.
- The BBC should investigate the feasibility of creating specific targets to ensure quality is being maintained in news. IBT suggests there could be a minimum number of stories which are original in each bulletin.
- The BBC Trust should make public information about the integration process taking place between the World Service and BBC News.
- More detail should be provided about the nature of the international current affairs programming planned for BBC2 at lunchtimes.
- The BBC Trust should encourage the successful integration of the World Service. This could be helped by creating targets to ensure that World Service journalists are being effectively used. For example, 10 pieces a year could come from each World Service correspondent on UK radio and TV. Additionally, there could be a target for the 10 o'clock news to have a percentage of stories from World Service journalists. The BBC Trust should investigate the feasibility of creating such targets.
- The BBC Trust should publish details of investment in training and development as part of the *Delivering Quality First* process. Included

¹³ Delivering Quality First page 52

within this should be details of training for bi-lingual journalists from the World Service.

- Drama should not only focus on the UK. There should be an ambition to bring us drama set in other countries to fulfil the global purpose remit and provide us with engaging and entertaining drama set in other countries.
- BBC3 should continue producing its distinctive and engaging current affairs programming which attract a new, younger audience to foreign affairs.
- In light of IBT's 2011 research, *Outside the Box*, the BBC Trust should review delivery of the global purpose to mainstream audiences.

Background: The International Broadcasting Trust

The International Broadcasting Trust is an educational and media charity working to promote high quality broadcast and online coverage of the developing world. Our aim is to further awareness and understanding of the lives of the majority of the world's people – and the issues which affect them.

Our work focuses on three main areas of activity:

- lobbying Government, regulators and broadcasters
- dialogue with the main public service broadcasters
- research on broadcast and online coverage of the developing world

We regularly publish research and organise events to encourage a greater understanding of the role which the media plays in engaging people in the UK with the wider world.

We are a membership based organisation. We organise briefings for our members so that they can work more closely with broadcasters and producers.

IBT's current membership includes the following organisations:

ActionAid, Age UK, Amnesty, British Red Cross, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Comic Relief, Concern, DEC, HelpAge International, IDS, International Service, Islamic Relief, Malaria Consortium, Merlin, MSF, ONE, Oxfam, PANOS, Plan, Progressio, Red, Save the Children, Tearfund, Think Global, Traidcraft Exchange, TVE, UNICEF, VSO, WaterAid, World Vision and WWF.