



NUJ response to the BBC's request to change the Operating Licence

January 2023

Question 1 : Do you agree with Ofcom's provisional assessment and its proposed changes to the Operating Licence for news and current affairs on BBC Radio 5 Live? If not, please explain why, providing appropriate supporting evidence where possible.

The NUJ would question why there is the need to reduce the News and Current Affairs quota and increase the sports quota without more information.

Which extra sports events and what content will be covered if this change goes ahead? Sports rights are in high demand so are we going to see the BBC bidding for the rights to cover new sports if this change gets the go ahead?

At a time when the BBC is saying that fewer people are listening to linear output, an alternative option would be to put extra sports content onto BBC Sounds or on Radio 5 Live Extra. 5Live Extra is the sister channel of 5 Live that broadcasts nothing but sport albeit only for a few hours each day because the BBC doesn't have enough sport to fill a full-time channel. The NUJ recognises the value of increasing sports content, including minority sports and extending coverage of women in sport. This should not be at the expense of news.

It seems the BBC already has other ways and other platforms that can achieve the objective of increasing sport content, reaching people from lower socio-economic groups and growing younger audiences – without the need to reduce the news quota on 5 Live.

Question 2: N/A for NUJ.

Question 3 : Do you agree with Ofcom's provisional assessment and its proposed changes to the Operating Licence for Programmes of a national or regional interest? If not, please explain why, providing appropriate supporting evidence where possible.

Introduction

The NUJ represents well over 1000 colleagues working in the BBC Nations and Regions, most of whom work on news and current affairs output. We note that these proposals from the BBC follow a turbulent time of cuts to staffing and output, with 450 job losses in BBC England alone over the past two years. A previous decision to end the weekly current affairs programme Inside Out was widely criticised at the time by the NUJ and by MPs, with concerns raised over the BBC's ability to provide meaningful investigative journalism and current affairs in the English Regions. As part of these cuts and restructuring the BBC scrapped a centralised hub for sub editing online content from the regions, hampering our colleagues' ability to produce the expected volume of content for online audiences.

This background is important, because it raises serious questions over the BBC's long-term commitment to local services, especially those provided on linear platforms. Successive reports tell us that traditional radio and TV broadcasts are the ones that reach the most vulnerable sections of the audience, who need and deserve a universal public broadcasting service, funded by everyone. We are not convinced that the BBC's recent proposals – to fund additional digital services at the expense, for example, of local radio – represents the right balance or commitment to those audiences, who may be “digitally poor”. The BBC's remit as a public service broadcaster is to provide a universal service to all licence fee payers – this approach risks disenfranchising many and jettisoning genuinely locally content that is valued and relied upon.

Regional TV news services

The NUJ is not opposed to minor scheduling changes for Breakfast and Late TV bulletins, which we feel will not adversely affect the audience. We note the BBC's flexibility in responding to breaking news or major events – such as the pandemic or elections – which may warrant extended coverage.

We did not agree with the BBC's decision to end its regional TV news services in Oxford and Cambridge, and do not accept the premise that an “enhanced new online service” will fill the gaps, especially for the “digitally poor” section of the audience. The BBC has since announced a new online page for Peterborough, but in Oxford and Cambridge there will only be one or two additional online writers. This cannot possibly replicate the depth of coverage previously provided by the TV opts. On this matter, we feel that Ofcom should have intervened and asked the BBC to provide more robust details of its plan for audiences moving forward.

We do note that Ofcom will require the BBC to track whether its strategy is working, and we ask that this scrutiny is applied robustly. We would further ask that particular attention is paid to audience satisfaction tracking in the Oxford and Cambridge regions.

Non-news programmes

The NUJ notes the ambition for the BBC to invest more money in “high impact” content – for example, drama – to better reflect the Nations and Regions of the UK. While there is logic in this strategy, we do not believe this should be at the expense of news and current affairs output.

We note that this consultation is running parallel with proposals in BBC Northern Ireland to scrap the Radio Foyle breakfast show and its bespoke news bulletins serving Derry and the North West. We feel that this would have a hugely detrimental impact on audiences in that area, who rely on Foyle's unique output to cover the region. NUJ members are further angered by the BBC's lack of consultation and its initial refusal to provide information on the costs of running Radio Foyle, the potential impact of the cuts on stress and workloads, and on equality impact. The hostile response to the request for this information from NUJ representatives was worrying and it required the intervention of the union's general secretary to secure the date. Our representatives have described the tone of management as “confrontational and disrespectful towards the union”.

Radio Foyle was established to reflect the needs and interests of listeners in Londonderry/Derry, Northern Ireland's second city and its border hinterland. The unique cultural identity of the region justified the establishment of BBC Radio Foyle and that need remains.

The proposal risks seriously damaging the BBC's reputation in reflecting the culture, history and sense of place in the area, especially as the news operation in Derry makes a significant contribution to network coverage of the island of Ireland on key issues such as Brexit, devolution and the peace agreement. Radio Foyle is a model of community engagement and provides a voice for a community which has long felt marginalised.

We note that the BBC says it has "no plans to reduce its current affairs offer in the devolved nations," and yet BBC Northern Ireland is proposing to do precisely that with the ending of its Inside Business programme and bespoke coverage of proceedings at Stormont. Current affairs output was previously scrapped in England with the ending of Inside Out. These decisions are not reflective of a public service broadcaster committed to maintaining quality, incisive and relevant regional and national current affairs output.

Current affairs in England

We agree with Ofcom that the BBC must be more transparent about its current affairs output in England. The NUJ remains deeply concerned that the weekly BBC One strand Inside Out was scrapped. Its replacement, We Are England, did not provide a sufficient replacement as it was largely features-based, and now it too has been scrapped.

While We Are England is now to be replaced with a new network of investigative journalists, we are concerned that the director general, Tim Davie, has already signalled that very little of this content will be afforded a peak time audience on BBC One, as was the case with Inside Out and We Are England. He told a DCMS select committee that he was not convinced a weekly 30-minute programme was "the best use of BBC One real estate". This kind of language is deeply worrying.

While the NUJ accepts that providing more investigative content online will be a positive move, it should not be done at the expense of cutting peak time linear programming on TV or in Local Radio. The BBC has previously argued that these programmes were not bringing in large audiences; we agree with Ofcom that audience figures should not be the only measure of public service broadcasting.

In conclusion

We welcome Ofcom's proposal to introduce greater "transparency" requirements on the BBC, so the progress of any changes to quotas and content can be properly measured. We believe

that this transparency should extend to the BBC's public reporting of the figures. The Annual Report alone is not enough to properly explain strategy – much of this document consists of meaningless tables and appendices, and is often out of date information by the time it is published.

We therefore request that Ofcom sets up, in tandem, a public feedback strategy to enable audiences and stakeholders to have their say as the plans progress. This could provide a valuable insight as to how well or otherwise the changes are being received. It would assist Ofcom's stated aim, namely: "If we have concerns about the BBC's performance, we can step in to address them, including by reverting the quotas to their previous levels or introducing further requirements."