

# **BBC Regulation Consultation: Submission to OFCOM**

10<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Submission by:

**Dr Caitriona Noonan (School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University)**

**and Dr Amy Genders (Faculty of Creative Industries, University of South Wales)**

---

We welcome OFCOM's decision to publicly consult on the BBC's public purposes. In considering the proposals we drew on our on-going research in the specific area of arts broadcasting (details of the project are available at: [www.artsbroadcasting.com](http://www.artsbroadcasting.com)). Since 2014 both researchers have been examining the market landscape for arts content on television, radio and online. Interviews with various senior stakeholders including television and radio executives, the independent sector and arts organizations inform our submission to this consultation, along with careful analysis of the current policy framework to support PSB. For the purposes of this document we focus on the questions concerning arts programming and on the public purposes:

- To support learning for people of all ages;
- To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services;
- To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the UK's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the UK.

## **Consultation Questions**

### **Q.3 Do you agree with the approach we have proposed for public purpose 2, including the high-level objectives and regulatory conditions we are proposing?**

This proposal goes some way to reassuring us that the substantial decline in arts content is recognised by OFCOM and that tentative steps are being taken to sustain and promote growth in the genre. Much of OFCOM's own research speaks to the on-going reductions in arts content on television particularly in terms of spend, including the most recent PSB Annual Report 2017. Therefore, we believe that intervention in this genre is both timely and necessary if it is remain part of the television landscape.

We welcome the introduction of new peak-time obligations for arts on BBC One and Two as our research highlights this as an area where arts is rapidly disappearing. Under 4.60 the proposal notes that these obligations should ‘be achievable as they reflect the current provision of these genres in peak-time slots’. While we recognise that OFCOM does not wish to be too prescriptive in these first months, we hope that the regulator will become more ambitious in the coming years and challenge the BBC to provide more content in this area. In general there has been a downward trajectory in arts content across the BBC channels (PSB Annual Report 2017) and so using the Corporation’s historic performance over the last five years as a benchmark in this area is unduly conservative in our view.

Equally, as the obligation allows the inclusion of repeats on both BBC One and Two it disincentives the transmission of new and original content on these channels – both of which are essential to reaching broad audiences. Again our research points to the widespread inclusion of repeats in the BBC’s scheduling and we believe this strategy undermines any ambition for ‘new and stimulating ideas and perspectives’ (1.19.4). While we recognise that commissioning and scheduling is fundamentally an issue for BBC management, we would like to see a quantifiable obligation for first-run content on BBC One and BBC Two written into the regulatory documents, ideally relating to spend.

The PSB Annual Report 2017 reports a reduction in spend across all broadcasters (to £36million) but a modest increase in hours to 1565. This suggests more being made with less as budgets are reduced. Formats and low cost programming are increasingly the norm within the genre of arts. There appears to be a growing danger of an imbalance toward more format/low-cost programmes such as *The Big Painting Challenge* at the expense of more critical/specialist programming. This is not a criticism of *The Big Painting Challenge* which has been relatively popular with audiences, but we advocate that a good public service arts proposition should provide both low cost content and high quality landmark programming (which inevitably has budget implications).

If this trend in spend/volume reported in the annual report continues it will have an adverse impact on supply. In the interviews we conducted with independent producers, many of which are well-established specialists in the genre, many report that they are struggling to provide high quality content on current budgets due to the particularities of producing in

this genre (e.g. image rights, location shooting, etc.). Indeed in just a decade there has been a marked decline in the number of independent production companies working in the genre of arts. As Ofcom (2015: 28) illustrates, in 2006 there were 49 companies active in this genre, by 2014 there were just 9. The provision of PSB and genres like arts requires both well-resourced broadcasters and viable suppliers in order to survive; this especially with the introduction of BBC Studios as there is a high degree of uncertainty about the impact of this structure on the provision of arts and other genres associated with public service.

A more general point we also note is the inclusion of specialist genres like arts under the purpose of learning. For us this raises a number of questions. Does all arts programming need to be educational? Where does this leave more critical, topical programmes? How does arts as a genre evolve within this context? The framing of arts solely in terms of learning may potentially impact on programming in terms of an over-reliance on the “lecture” pundit mode of address/style (e.g. *Face of Britain*). This framing also reiterates the perception that arts can’t be entertaining. While valuable in their own right, we fear that the categorisation of arts (and other public service genres) under learning alone would limit an already narrow area of provision in terms of creativity and innovation.

Therefore in response to this question, while we agree broadly with the approach taken by OFCOM, we wish to see more specificity in relation to the quotas for original programming on peak time BBC One and BBC Two. Our research of relevant contextual factors and industry structures suggests that this will be central to the BBC achieving its public purposes and creating sustainable levels of arts and cultural output.

**Q.5. Do you agree with the approach we have proposed for public purpose 4, including the high-level objectives and regulatory conditions we are proposing?**

Again, we would strongly advocate more detail and specificity in this purpose relating to the provision of arts content in and for Wales. According to the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA 2015: 28) output of Arts and Music programming in 2014/15 on BBC Wales ‘was limited’ constituting just 12.9 hours. This needs to be contextualized against substantial evidence of the need for and value of arts broadcasting to Wales.

A 2016 survey by the Arts Council of Wales found that ‘96% of Welsh adults attend and/or participate in the arts each year’ compared to sports events which were reportedly only attended by 41% of respondents. Furthermore, according to the Arts Council’s website ‘over 24,000 people are employed in the arts and creative industries, in a sector that contributed around £465m to the Welsh economy’. As the Arts Council’s response to the BBC Charter review states: ‘Arts and culture matter to Wales’ (2015: 2).

For audiences too, arts broadcasting is very London centric and this is an issue for them. For instance, respondents to a 2014 public consultation on the BBC’s television services highlighted the need for ‘more regional coverage of arts, culture, music and festivals with less reliance on London/English events and the big national events (e.g. The Proms, Glastonbury)’ (BBC Trust, 38).

If ‘obligations’ for increases in the output hours of arts are being set for BBC network, then we believe this should also be applied in a nations and regions context also. Therefore, we would like to see more specific detail around the provision of the arts on BBC Wales (but also BBC Scotland and BBC Northern Ireland).

***Q.7 Do you agree with our proposed overall approach to performance measurement?***

We welcome OFCOM’s inclusion of a structure for gathering both quantitative and qualitative research on the BBC’s performance going forward. We recognise the regulators on-going, innovative attempts to engage stakeholders in its research and make findings accessible to the public.

Building on the plans for research outlined in the proposal, we would propose an ‘ad-hoc’ review of arts content in the near future that examines in-depth some of the contextual factors and solutions to the problems with provision already identified. The timing of this is crucial as the priorities for BBC Studios becomes more apparent and the DCMS’ plans for a contestable fund are likely to be in motion. Themes that OFCOM could include as part of its review might be:

- How is arts programming being delivered currently (i.e. more granular detail relating to the scheduling, style and characteristics of arts programming across BBC services).

- Quantitative and qualitative audience data relating to the consumption of and attitudes towards arts programming across BBC services.
- What impact has BBC Studios had on the provision of arts content and other public service genres such as science and religion.

To conclude, we support OFCOM's ambition to enhance the provision of public service content in the UK. We recognise the scope and complexity of the current activities but we advocate greater detail relating to some aspects of its oversight of arts programming in order that the genre's 'at risk' status can be alleviated.

## References

BBC Trust (2014) *Service Licence Review of BBC TV: BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three and BBC Four – Analysis of Responses to Public Consultation*. [Online] Available at: [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory\\_framework/service\\_licences/service\\_reviews/television\\_services/consultation\\_analysis.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_framework/service_licences/service_reviews/television_services/consultation_analysis.pdf) (accessed 28<sup>th</sup> June 2017)

IWA (2015) *Wales Media Audit*. Available at: [iwa.wales/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/IWA\\_MediaAudit\\_v4.pdf](http://iwa.wales/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/IWA_MediaAudit_v4.pdf) (accessed 28<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

Ofcom (2015) *Trends in TV Production*. Available at: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/79551/o\\_o\\_annex\\_trends.pdf?lang=cym](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/79551/o_o_annex_trends.pdf?lang=cym) (accessed 25 May 2017).