

RADIOCENTRE RESPONSE TO BBC TRUST SERVICE REVIEW OF BBC NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

Overview

1. BBC News and journalism arguably has a greater impact on its audiences than any other part of its output. It is estimated that the BBC is the source of around 70% of all news consumption via broadcast in the UK¹, and continues in a digital age to be recognised as a high quality news provider to millions around the world.
2. Whilst the majority of BBC News output is exemplary, and at its best emblematic of public service broadcasting, the BBC must ensure that its services continue to be distinctive during a period of increased competition in journalism from a plethora of media providers, including commercial radio.
3. 35% of the population use radio as a source of news, and 15% of these people use both commercial and BBC stations². RadioCentre believes that radio news in its entirety can be strengthened and become even more relevant to UK audiences in future, but to do that the BBC must offer a complementary service of quality and distinctiveness.
4. This response will therefore examine three areas of relevance to radio news, consistent with the broad responsibilities of each BBC station; value for money, content, and market impact. We use these broad themes to draw conclusions as to the appropriate strategic direction of BBC News on radio services as a whole, in order for them to continue to prioritise the highest quality news output in the future.
5. The key points in the response are:
 - Overall BBC news and current affairs output is of a high standard and provides valuable content for listeners.
 - All efforts should be made to provide the most distinctive radio news output as efficiently as possible.
 - Service licence conditions could be more ambitious and prioritise public service content.
 - BBC music radio could be doing more to provide distinctive news output. Specifically our monitoring suggests that Radio 2 and its flagship news programme are missing their targets.
 - The BBC should tread carefully in offering national and local news to ensure that it is complementary to commercial media.

Background

6. BBC News continues to provide impartial and independent coverage to more than a quarter of a billion people around the world every week. In the UK, the BBC's news services reach over 82% of the population. A recent Ofcom study showed that 58% of the public rate the BBC as the one source they trust the most, whilst more than half (53%) of respondents named a BBC source as their most important source of news³. It is therefore no wonder that the Director General, himself a former head of BBC News, has recently stated that "news is at the heart of the BBC's mission"⁴.

¹ By Roger Mosey, '[A smaller BBC would be good for audiences](#)', The Times, 8 November 2013.

² Ofcom, '[News consumption in the UK - 2013 report](#)', 25 September 2013.

³ [Ibid.](#)

⁴ Tony Hall, '[Director-General's Introduction](#)', *BBC Annual Report 2012/13*, 20 June 2013.

7. On each of the platforms where it is present, the BBC has the highest share of news reach in the UK. BBC One is the by far the most used news source on television, with 57% of the population accessing it as a news source⁵. The popularity of the BBC News website continues to grow, with an average of 19.6 million UK weekly browsers, whilst the BBC News app for mobiles and tablets now has 9 million registered users⁶.
8. 35% of UK adults claim to consume news through the radio. Of these, 68% say they use a BBC Radio station for this purpose, compared to 43% using any commercial radio station⁷. RAJAR figures highlight that the BBC network stations Radio 2, Radio 4 and Radio 1 have the highest reach of radio news, with the *Today programme* and the *Jeremy Vine* show being the most popular shows; both drawing nearly 7 million listeners each week respectively⁸.
9. Indeed, it could be argued that the BBC recognises radio as the primary method of news broadcasting in the UK. 11,317 hours of news were broadcast on BBC Radio last year, compared to only 3,565 hours on TV⁹. The appointment of former Head of News, Helen Boaden, as Director of Radio at the BBC should strengthen these ties with news even further.

Value for money

10. Against this background, as part of the BBC's recent evaluation of its overarching strategic plan, Delivering Quality First (DQF), the BBC continues to attempt to save £700m across the corporation and shrink the overall news headcount by 600 staff in time for the 2016/17 financial year. This will also involve popular music stations planning to reduce funding for news significantly by the end of 2013.¹⁰
11. By April 2014, it is anticipated that the BBC News Division will already have achieved £38 million of necessary savings, meaning a further £20 million in cuts still required across news at a time when Tony Hall's vision of a creative, digital future for the BBC means expansion in many other areas, such as BBC iPlayer¹¹. The Head of BBC News has recently claimed that this leaves little scope for investing in new and original journalism for the future¹².
12. Better defined efficiencies in BBC Radio News were overdue. When John Myers reviewed BBC music radio in 2011, he found the news departments 'expensive to run and both structurally and financially complicated.'¹³ Radio 1 *Newsbeat* alone, a service offering only two 15 minute news programmes per weekday, had 52 staff. This level of resource for news on a single BBC music radio station seemed to be generous, particularly when compared to the whole of UK commercial radio, which is estimated to engage approximately 300 journalists across more than 300 licensed stations¹⁴.
13. However, RadioCentre would be concerned if resource reduction meant the BBC was failing to prioritise distinctive journalistic output on its radio services. Whilst it is right that the BBC News

⁵ Ofcom, [News consumption](#).

⁶ BBC, ['The BBC Executive's Review and Assessment'](#), *BBC Annual Report 2012/13*, 20 June 2013.

⁷ Ofcom, [News consumption](#).

⁸ RAJAR, [Q3 2013](#).

⁹ BBC, [Annual Report](#).

¹⁰ Josh Halliday, ['BBC to axe 75 news posts'](#), *The Guardian*, 19 September 2013.

¹¹ Tony Hall, ['Director-General Tony Hall unveils his vision for the BBC'](#), 8 October 2013.

¹² James Harding, ['BBC News and Current Affairs – Our stories'](#), 5 December 2013.

¹³ John Myers, [Synergies within BBC Radio 1, Radio 2, 1Xtra and 6Music](#), May 2011.

¹⁴ Mediatique, [The provision of news in the UK](#), June 2012.

operation should be streamlined and all necessary efficiencies made, this should not be to the detriment of BBC output. Instead, **BBC management should use this opportunity to increase and expand news services so that they can better source news and current affairs.** We are therefore pleased to note that the BBC are attempting to progress towards creating a single, integrated, BBC newsgathering service.

Distinctive content

14. RadioCentre recognises that our industry and, more importantly, our society, would be poorer without dedicated news stations such as the World Service, Radio 4 and Radio 5 Live, and programmes like *Today* and the *World Tonight*.
15. Indeed, Radio 4 continues to represent a source of news and current affairs in the truest form of public service broadcasting. It delivers high quality, distinctive news and entertainment programming which, by its very nature, would be extremely difficult for the commercial sector to replicate. It continues to strive to break ground with new content, and is rightly used by the BBC to illustrate the very best broadcasting talent.
16. However, we have highlighted previously that there are several areas where news and current affairs content across BBC radio could be improved. For example, there are opportunities in the schedules of BBC popular music services to increase the volume and distinctiveness of news and current affairs provision, and we would encourage the Trust to examine opportunities to provide more of this type of output in music radio.
17. **Service licence conditions continue to reflect a lack of ambition to prioritise public service radio broadcasting.** Radio 1 is instructed to ‘broadcast at least 40 new documentaries each year’¹⁵ and Radio 3 ‘broadcast at least 30’¹⁶ but there are no requirements on the length, subject matter or scheduling of these documentaries. Similarly, 5 Live and Radio 2 continue to focus disproportionately on celebrity gossip and popular music shows as part of their respective news targets.
18. We have already highlighted above that news could be delivered for significantly less resource than currently prescribed on Radio 1 and 1Xtra. More broadly, news and current affairs output is not having the impact which it could amongst younger audiences. Much of this is because the BBC does not give distinctive journalism the scheduling priority on its youth orientated stations.
19. **News, documentaries, social action campaigns, advice programmes and other current affairs output must be better scheduled** to maximise their public value. Our assessment is that Radio 1 is delivering news, current affairs and social action output, but that these strands are not having as great an impact on young audiences as might be expected as they are not being broadcast at peak times.
20. There are wider structural implications in this failure to reach young people with current affairs output. If the BBC is unable to engage young listeners in news and current affairs at peak broadcast times on its flagship youth service, the organisation as a whole is underserving young people in line with BBC public purposes, and specifically failing licence-fee payers who use radio as a news resource.

¹⁵ BBC Trust, [Radio 1 Service Licence](#), May 2013.

¹⁶ BBC Trust, [Radio 3 Service Licence](#), May 2013.

21. Of all news sources used in the UK, Ofcom has found recently that the most-used radio station is BBC Radio 2 (8%, in seventh position), and 72% of those who consume news through BBC Radio 2 do so at least once a day¹⁷. Radio 2 therefore has a responsibility to be at the forefront of public service content in news and current affairs, and crucially should provide different types of news output to better cater for this returning audience.
22. Radio 2 has a service licence commitment to 'broadcast at least 16 hours of news and current affairs programming each week, including regular news bulletins.'¹⁸ Currently, we believe that **Radio 2 is missing its target for news and current affairs output** because – apart from short news, sport and travel bulletins throughout the day – the only prescribed news and current affairs slot is the *Jeremy Vine* show; which although it is widely acclaimed as high quality radio, cannot be judged to contain 100% news output as it is currently. In fact our monitoring suggests that only a minority of the show is news content (see below).
23. When RadioCentre responded to the service licence review of 5 Live and Sports Extra in 2011, we highlighted that the BBC continues to struggle to properly define what constitutes 'news'. Our monitoring highlighted a leaning towards 'soft' entertainment and listener phone-in issues in the 5 Live schedule, rather than the serious or 'hard' news which has more value to the public. Therefore the *Richard Bacon* show, which is a high quality programme covering a combination of topical news stories as well as celebrity interviews and entertainment-led features, is still considered 100% news by the BBC. This is similar to some aspects of the music based magazine format of *Jeremy Vine* on Radio 2.
24. In terms of audience, with 7.3 million listeners a week, the *Jeremy Vine* show is the biggest current affairs programme on either radio or TV in the country¹⁹. The programme has a standard format, which features four topical items that range in depth and tone. This means that for every major government policy issue of the day discussed, listeners are also invited to contact the show about a variety of topics which could be termed gossip; from 'hairdresser chats'²⁰ to if the listener is 'a fan of skinny dipping'²¹.
25. On average, *Jeremy Vine* plays 11 songs per show²². Taking a conservative average song length of 4 minutes, this means 44 minutes of music per show. From RadioCentre monitoring, we also estimate at least one in four of the 'news' features on the show should not be considered as genuine news stories; so up to 25% of the remaining 76 minutes. Adding this music and non-news speech together, **more than an hour (63 mins), or 52.5%, of the Jeremy Vine show is not news content.** Crucially, this does not include trails or cross promotion, which would increase the proportion non-news content on the show still further.
26. This conservative estimate of non-news content on *Jeremy Vine* reduces Radio 2's stated news and current affairs programming by 5 hours and 15 minutes each week. This has serious implications, as without any other dedicated news show on the network, Radio 2 is at risk of missing its service licence condition of at least 16 hours of news and current affairs programming.

¹⁷ Ofcom, [News consumption](#).

¹⁸ BBC Trust, [Radio 2 Service Licence](#), May 2013.

¹⁹ RAJAR, [Q3 2013](#).

²⁰ BBC Radio 2 @BBCRadio2, "Going anywhere nice for your holidays?' @thejeremyvine wants to know if you dread or enjoy #hairdresser chat?' 17 December 2012. [Tweet](#).

²¹ BBC Radio 2 @BBCRadio2, 'Are you a fan of skinny dipping? Or perhaps you used to be? #R2Vine wants to hear from you. Tweet us back!' 1 May 13. [Tweet](#).

²² [Radiomonitor](#) analysis of weekdays in November when Vine was presenting.

- 27. RadioCentre recommends that the Trust inserts a new condition into the BBC Radio 2 service licence in order to ensure the station meets its news requirement.** This could take the form of another news show on Radio 2 in daytime in addition to *Jeremy Vine*, the removal of music on *Jeremy Vine*, lengthened Radio 2 news bulletins or content originally recorded for Radio 4 being repurposed for Radio 2 listeners.
28. When RadioCentre responded to the Trust review of BBC Local Radio, we highlighted that the inclusion of music in the weekday daytime schedule (amounting to almost a fifth of daytime output) diluted the distinctiveness of BBC Local Radio services. A recent Kantar Media study of commercial radio listeners highlighted that 79% of our listeners tune in because of music²³. BBC Radio must strive to offer licence fee payers something which they cannot get elsewhere.
29. Ofcom has found that of the 9% of the total UK population that listen to local radio news, commercial radio listeners were more likely than their BBC equivalents to rely on local radio²⁴. This is not only echoed by listening share, where local commercial radio dominates the market, but the Kantar Media study we commissioned also identified that 84% of local commercial listeners are satisfied with the local news their station provided²⁵.
30. BBC Radio has a responsibility to offer local and regional radio listeners something commercial radio cannot provide: a dedicated local news service committed to older and minority audiences in surrounding communities. The stations were founded with a commitment first and foremost to news, and should continue to provide a vital news source for specific licence-fee paying groups.
31. There is an opportunity for BBC Local Radio to be the first level of a linked news network which would launch local news and staff onto the national stage. A single, integrated, BBC newsgathering service which works together to share resources and content more effectively across the BBC, while investing in distinctive journalism, should be able to do more in depth news with streamlined resources at all levels of BBC Radio.

Market impact

32. The BBC provides news at local, national and international level on every media platform. Whilst this omnipresence can be considered a strength in terms of news reporting and cross promotion of content, it should not be to the detriment of independent commercial providers; who provide plurality of voice, particularly in local markets.
33. **With the local news sector at increasing risk of market failure, the BBC must ensure its content does not further threaten local media.** Commercial radio and other local media are already under serious financial pressures from a combined recent economic downturn, coupled with further competition for advertising spend from emerging media such as Online and Local TV. The BBC should not add to this competition with indistinct content that duplicates commercial offerings.
34. Despite its problems in the past year, 58% of the population still rate BBC News as the most trusted source of news in the UK. 44% of respondents say they trust BBC journalists, which is higher than broadsheet journalists (38%), Conservative politicians (19%) and tabloid journalists

²³ Kantar Media, *Public Value of Commercial Radio*, 3 October 2013.

²⁴ Ofcom, [UK audience attitudes to the broadcast media](#), 7 May 2013.

²⁵ Kantar Media, *Public Value of Commercial Radio*, 3 October 2013.

(10%)²⁶. Indeed, BBC radio continues to rate higher than commercial equivalents in terms of being 'accurate and reliable', 'trustworthy', 'impartial' and 'unbiased'²⁷.

35. The BBC continues to be the lead player in UK News both structurally and in the minds of licence-fee payers. It should use this trust responsibly. BBC News should always be aware of the impact its advert free services have on struggling commercial media outlets, and instead of swamping a market it should complement and strengthen the parallel commercial media voice.
36. In practice, this means featuring distinctive content commercial radio cannot provide, such as in-depth features and analysis; not covering entertainment lead features; and crediting commercial media appropriately when they are the source of a story.
37. **The BBC continues to avoid crediting commercial broadcasters when covering a news story on radio, television or online.** RadioCentre has commented in the past that BBC websites appear just as reluctant to link out to the content of commercial rivals as BBC stations are to credit a commercial source during broadcast; even when the information is of interest and value to the licence-fee payer²⁸.
38. We have spoken above about how a technologically advanced, collaborative and streamlined BBC News service can produce a more distinctive journalistic offering. There is no reason why this cannot also occur in the wider market, and commercial radio would be interested in exploring with BBC counterparts the potential of shared resources for sourcing, reporting and promoting news stories in the future as part of a more joined up and efficient newsgathering service.

About RadioCentre

39. Founded in 2006 after the merger of the Radio Advertising Bureau (RAB) and the Commercial Radio Companies Association (CRCA), RadioCentre represents a range of commercial radio groups and stations from rural, small scale ventures, to household names serving major metropolitan areas. RadioCentre's member companies operate 245 licensed stations across the UK, through 45 different businesses, which represent 90% of commercial radio in terms of listening and revenue.

RadioCentre, December 2013

RadioCentre
6th Floor, 55 New Oxford Street
London
WC1A 1BS
t: +44 (0) 20 7010 0650
www.radiocentre.org

²⁶ P Kellner, ['The Problem of Trust'](#), *Yougov*, 13 November 2012.

²⁷ Ofcom, [News consumption](#).

²⁸ As examples. the recent [BBC coverage of the 6th December launch of the Worcester radio multiplex](#) negated to mention commercial partners; BBC Local does not credit commercial stations organising charity events, such as the Free Radio Walk; nor does BBC Online feature coverage of gigs like the Capital [Summertime](#) and [Jingle Bell](#) Balls despite these artists being of relevance to young people.