

Regional Audience Council for BBC East

Minutes of meeting

Tuesday 6 January 2009

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Council members present:

Jennifer Akpeki-Tyrell	Link to BBC Three Counties Radio
Susan Hales	
Stuart Hobley	Joint link to BBC Radio Suffolk
Chandi Hubert	
Helen Hunt	Link to BBC Radio Northampton;
Annie Kiff-Wood	Joint link to BBC Radio Suffolk
Joe Lewis	
Nicola Mullany	
Laura Mungovan	
Marcus Tinworth	Link to BBC Essex
Clarke Willis (CW)	Chair RAC East, Link to BBC Radio Norfolk

Absent:: Melvina Dunnett, Dominic O'Sullivan, Peter Short

In attendance:

BBC Trust

Frances Bryant Adviser, England, BBC Trust

BBC

Jason Horton Managing Editor BBC Radio Cambridgeshire

John Sparrow Public Accountability Manager, East & London RACs

1. Welcome, introductions and apologies for absence

Clarke Willis welcomed everyone to the meeting. He introduced Jason Horton, who was deputising for Tim Bishop (Head of Region) as well as responding to members' critique of BBC Radio Cambridgeshire; and Frances Bryant, Accountability Adviser, England.

Apologies were received from Melvina Dunnett, Dominic O'Sullivan and Peter Short

2. Minutes of 11 November 2008 meeting and notification of burning issues.

The minutes were distributed.

2.1 Minutes

Approved

2.2 Matters arising: Reporting and "making" news

Clarke Willis reiterated his wish to consider the distinction between these (topic raised at 11 November meeting) **CW and JS to discuss how to progress**

2.3 Members' burning issues

2.3.1 Quality of moderation on *Have Your Say* message-boards

2.3.2 BBC treatment of Edward Stourton

2.3.3 language content of pre-watershed programmes (with ref to "blow-jobs" by Jools Holland in *Top Gear*)

CW and JS to discuss how to progress.

Watershed/current standards/thresholds of taste a possible outreach topic

3. Reports

3.1 Head of Region's report

Tim Bishop's report had been circulated.

Jason Horton noted that because this report had been prepared only about a month after the previous RAC meeting it might seem rather lightweight since there was little new to say.

In the wake of the Brand/Ross affair, he noted a renewed emphasis on the editorial compliance process for all pre-recorded items including features of 15 minutes or more. Staff producing and presenting live programmes had also been reminded about relevant guidelines, including handling live phone-calls. He emphasised that much still relied on staff judgement.

3.2 December Audience Council England (ACE) meeting

Draft minutes had been circulated and copies were tabled.

Clarke Willis drew attention to the following points:

- The suggestions for development of English Regions programme output now that the BBC Trust has turned down the BBC Local proposal.
- The Director General's response to the ACE letter about the BBC Trust's impartiality report. This is on the agenda for the ACE presentation to BBC Trustees later in the month.

3.3 Members' views on the definitions of and distinctions between local and regional in BBC output.

Representative comments

- BBC Local Radio should be more local than BBC regional television; local radio is more personal and more immediate.
- Much depends on where you live – especially town/city compared to rural locations, which influences your personal definition of "local".
- Local radio is valuable in emergencies, when its very local nature is considered helpful. Five of the six BBC local stations in the East are local – Three Counties Radio is regional and therefore somewhat impersonal.
- Regional broadcasting works best when issues, topics, reports have a wide and common significance.
- Broadcasting must reflect natural or pre-existing regions (e.g. the North West) to ensure that content is as broadly interesting and valued as possible. Artificial regions such as BBC East can simply serve to highlight differences and lack of synergy which detracts from cohesion.

Chair's summary

"Local" is clearly people's immediate foreground, defined by their precise locality, whether rural, town or city. Topics are likely to be those of immediate concern, or local manifestations of wider issues. Members felt

that most BBC Local Radio stations in the BBC East region were indeed local, working best when defined by the single county they aim to serve. “Regional” related to people’s identity, relying on logical or natural regions rather than those artificially brought into being by the location of television transmitters.

4. Trust business

4.1 Accountability review

A summary paper had been distributed.

Frances Bryant outlined the consultation process that had led to the proposals outlined.

She highlighted the strength the consultants had identified in the diversity of RAC membership, which offers genuine grass-roots opinion. There is a lack of clarity in the relationship between RACs, ACE and the BBC Trust and uncertainty among RAC members about the value of their contributions. Changes, notably a reduction in the number of RAC agenda items, would facilitate more in-depth discussions about the BBC from a regional perspective, with the potential to highlight wider issues that might resonate with other regions in England. A key proposal is reducing the number of formal meetings to four per year, retaining two outreach events. ACE meetings would increase from six to eight per year. A more formal and regular role for deputy chairs is proposed to spread workload.

ACE members had discussed the proposals at their December meeting. Many were concerned about losing contact with their RACs, which they felt were the lifeblood of the operation. ACE members have been invited to complete a questionnaire on aspects of the proposals. Frances Bryant said that these responses and other factors are still being compiled.

One member was disappointed with the proposal that many of the consultation papers would no longer be distributed. The job losses were also regretted.

[**Later:** Two members wrote to Frances Bryant expressing a number of concerns, notably the loss of linkage with ACE through the reduction in RAC meetings and the lack of certainty that output from those meetings would be considered at ACE]

4.2 BBC Local

Members were aware that the BBC Trust had turned down management’s proposals for this initiative.

Individual comments:

- BBC Trust seems to have been influenced by external commercial interests
- It seemed a defensive, political decision

BBC Management comment

It was a disappointing decision – they had felt that at least some part of the proposal would be approved. Their task now is to consider how the associated funds can best be used.

Chair’s comment

This felt inevitable. The proposal was not compatible with the original trial [in the West Midlands], but this outcome will stimulate a review of all English regional output, possibly leading to a broader range of genres as well as increased news coverage.

4.3 Impartiality review monitoring.

East RAC members with internet access are monitoring the main stories on the BBC News website between Monday 5 and Friday 9 January. All returns to John Sparrow by Monday 12 January.

Clarke Willis asked members to compare the stories covered in England with those covered in the other nations.

5. Programme and service review

5.1 BBC Radio Cambridgeshire

The Managing Editor's overview, a CD sampler of output and a summary of the service licence had been distributed. Members were asked to compare the sampler with the output of their own local station and to listen to live output in the week beginning 5 January when schedules return to normal.

Individual members' comments

- I enjoyed the mix of news – local, national and international. Also the early morning and Sunday morning programmes.
- My main reason for listening is travel information. There's too much emphasis on train departures from London and Peterborough, not enough on local arrivals. Also it's sometimes not clear which train stations are referred to. I think that Jeremy Sallis picks interesting topics and encourages debate.
- The Radio 2 travel service is better – more immediate and up to date. People who use local radio for travel information need a service that covers their region.
- I enjoyed the breakfast show – good local content, including lots on football.
- I found the new year's eve programme a struggle.
- There seemed to be lots of deputy presenters over Christmas, *[Withheld from published minutes under section 36 of the Act.]*
- How does the station manage its football coverage – especially in view of recent local team successes?

Managing Editor's response

Jason Horton thanked members for their valuable feedback. Responding to concerns about traffic news, he noted that it had improved over the last two years, but its weakness is still poor information sources – there was often better information from individual listeners. He commented that the station had not provided such a comprehensive service over the Christmas period, though news and sport had been maintained. He was sorry that people didn't care for the deputy presenters. The normal schedule resumed on Monday 5 January. For football coverage, the station makes full use of its several AM and FM frequencies as well as DAB to provide simultaneous coverage of key matches. Fortunately fees for rights are not a current concern, but this might change if local teams move up a league.

5.2 Other BBC local radio stations in the region

Reports from RAC links to stations were distributed and tabled.

5.3 BBC comedy programmes

Members were invited to watch a DVD of *Beautiful People*, (a new comedy drama broadcast on BBC Two in September 08) and to sample a range of current comedy programmes on television and radio, including Christmas offerings, to form an opinion about the current state of BBC comedy.

The range of programmes members had sampled included *Outnumbered*, *Gavin & Stacey*, *Have I Got News...*, *Blackadder*, *The Royle Family*, *Wallace and Gromit*, *Little Britain* and a small number of radio comedy programmes.

- *Wallace and Gromit* proved to be the most universal hit”
- Many were surprised and amazed by *Outnumbered*, though one member felt that the dialogue given to the children was inappropriate for their age – they were unaware of its significance.
- *Beautiful People* produced mainly negative reactions – “thrown together”; “a bit strained, too stereotypical and obvious”; “it fulfilled expectations perfectly”.
- Some older members preferred more established comedy (e.g. various outings of *Morecambe and Wise*)
- The few who had sampled radio comedy found it of poor standard.
- Members acknowledged the range of tastes and expectations among the audience and the difficulty in pleasing everyone, crediting the BBC for attempting to do so.
- One member also approved of the BBC commitment to developing new series, having the confidence to stay with new formats though they may not be immediate ratings successes.

Chair’s summary

Comedy in its various forms remains a key ingredient in BBC output. Indeed since it is a main element in entertainment programming it arguably plays an important part in the Citizenship public purpose, by bringing audiences to the BBC. Clearly, Creativity and Cultural Excellence is also fulfilled. Members were surprised by the range and achievement of comedy in general, with strong views on what they liked and disliked. Radio comedy received a poor reception. However, members did acknowledge that audience expectation is now much more diverse than, say, 15 years ago, and that the BBC has responded successfully by offering a range of comedy programmes for this broader range of tastes. Members also implicitly credited the BBC for its risk-taking in developing new series, even when initial audience reaction was lukewarm.

6. Outreach

6.1 Children’s services

The ACE report, comprising RAC comments about BBC services for 13-34 age group and the results of RAC outreach among children 13-16, has been signed off and is ready for submission to the BBC Trust as the ACE contribution to this consultation. Copies were distributed with other meeting papers.

The children’s outreach event for the East was held in Parnwell, Peterborough, attended by seven children, who created and performed two sketches in response to

the scenario document. Three RAC members observed and asked the children about the background to their performances.

Video material captured at RAC events throughout England has been compiled into a seven minute DVD which was shown at the December ACE meeting.

Lack of time prevented these DVDs being shown during the meeting. John Sparrow agreed to circulate copies. **Action: JS**

Stuart Hobley, whose contacts had led the RAC to the Young Lives group in Parnwell, fed back the children's appreciation of the opportunity and the way the day was managed.

7. Burning issues / any other business

See item 2.3 above.

8. Date, time and place of next meeting:

Wednesday 4 March, The Forum Boardroom, Norwich at 3.15 for 3.30-5.30pm

Ends

[We aim to make as much of the minutes available as possible. However, there will be times when sections of the minutes will be withheld from publication. These will be kept to a minimum and clearly marked.]

The reasons for withholding information are consistent with the Freedom of Information Act which applies to some of the BBC's information. See www.bbc.co.uk/foi for further explanation.]