

Regional Audience Council for BBC London

Meeting : Monday 2 March 2009
The Creative Space
BBC Marylebone High Street, London

MINUTES

Present

Patricia Adley
Steve Ashton
Michael Davenport
Christine Fanthome Chair
Paul Chapman
Elizabeth Heath
Ivor John
Christiana Ominiyi
Emma Palmer
Tasneem Saiki
Amir Shah
Shelley Ward Link to BBC London 94.9
Jennifer Vidal

BBC:

Amanda Rice, A/Head of BBC Diversity Centre
John Sparrow, Public Accountability Manager

Absent: Jonathan Kewley

1. Chair's welcome, introductions and apologies

Christine Fanthome welcomed everyone and introduced Amanda Rice, acting Head of BBC Diversity Centre, who had joined the meeting to explain her role and take questions.

Apologies for absence received from Jonathan Kewley

2. Minutes: January meeting and matters arising

Copies had been distributed.

Follow-up re potential effect of iPlayer on licence-fee:

John Sparrow explained that people receiving BBC television services are still expected to pay the TV licence fee.

The meeting asked for this topic to become an agenda item.

Action JS

3. Diversity in the BBC – Amanda Rice

3.1 introduction

Amanda explained that the BBC's Diversity Centre is part of BBC People (the HR function) but has a pan-BBC role, influencing the workforce, output, content and engaging with audiences. It is a small but strategic department with staff in BBC Vision (advising on portrayal) and BBC Nations and Regions; also supporting diversity champions in each BBC division. The aim is to embed diversity in all BBC activity.

3.2 Members' questions

- What is the range and scope of diversity in the BBC?

It includes age, BME, disability, sex and faith. It also looks into regionality and class.

- What links with other organisations

Consultations with external organisations (e.g. Age Concern, Stonewall) and there are BBC staff workgroups for disabled, black and Asian and lesbian and gay employees.

- Is there a Portrayal consultant?

Yes, it's Mary Fitzpatrick, who is based with BBC Vision and is available to advise on all television output. [She attended a London RAC meeting with Hilary Salmon for the discussion on *Shoot The Messenger* in 2007]

- How does she work – what is her remit?

She liaises with programme makers and advises on portrayal. She is working towards an obligation to ensure consideration of diversity at programme commissioning stage. She is also encouraging involvement between the Cultural Diversity Network and independent production companies, so that the independent sector can fulfil diversity expectations as well

- Are there faith-based forums too?

We're currently considering the best approach to religion. There's already a Christian network and there's the possibility of one for Muslims.

- Is there a young at heart forum?

Not at present. The Marketing, Communications and Audiences (MCA) division has a great deal of research information on specific groups within the overall audience including for example research on the expectations of disabled people.

- What about positive images of BME people?

The BBC must remain impartial, but the Centre pays attention to negative feedback and the complaints process.

- Surprised that the unit is so small

As explained, it's intended to be strategic, supporting champions within BBC divisions. One strand of work is setting up measurement frameworks and monitoring the diversity of the workforce. The BBC acknowledges that while overall diversity is satisfactory there are insufficient people from ethnic minorities among senior management.

- What progress with the mentoring scheme for BME BBC staff?

The current cohort is close to completing their course, while a new application round is in progress. It's supported by senior managers, with the aim of developing future BBC leaders.

- Is the issue of London-centric output within your remit

This isn't a Diversity responsibility, though as explained, regionality is part of the brief

We are in the process of developing Equality Impact Assessments (similar to Risk Assessments) to assess the potential effect of a BBC policy on diverse groups. The aim is to operate these within each BBC division. We believe this will raise the profile of diversity issues in decision-making.

- How reporting of portrayal is managed, how targets are set and whether they are sufficiently stretching? (profile of Beijing Paralympics and BBC Three commitment to disability portrayal cited)

The BBC's obligations as a public body are TV Licensing, digital switchover, access services (e.g. subtitling, audio description and physical access to its buildings) and BBC Trust audience engagement. At present its output, including portrayal, is defined as a private function and therefore outside current legislation – though this may change imminently.

The BBC has targets for employment (e.g. percentages of BME and disabled staff) and goals for diversity within its programmes.

Amanda agrees that there is more to do in portraying disability and involving actors with disabilities. Though much has been achieved, improving portrayal remains a priority, predominantly a task for BBC Vision, casting directors in particular. [At the BBC's Disability Forum the Executive Producer of *EastEnders* committed to introduce a disabled character this year]

- What is the diversity of people in the Diversity Centre?

Age range 24-51, four BME, one disabled

- Can members raise further questions after this meeting?

Yes. Please route via John Sparrow, with a deadline of end of March.

Action: ALL

Christine thanked Amanda Rice for her contribution to the meeting.

4. Reports

4.1 Audience Council England (draft minutes)

The minutes had been distributed.

Christine drew attention to the decision at ACE about the accountability review. Members were disappointed at the outcome in view of their wish to continue with six business meetings per year as well as outreach. However they recognised that the linkage between RACs and ACE had been maintained.

[Meeting arrangements in the business year beginning April 2009 will be transitional because meeting dates have already been published]

Members asked whether they can attend ACE meetings as observers and whether they will be able to see minutes of ACE strategic business meetings.

Action: JS to check

5. Draft Annual Report from London RAC

The report was accepted, with the addition of a reference to members' reaction to the outcome of the accountability review.

6. Trust business and feedback

The Public Value Test on BBC Local Video was distributed.

7. Programme and service review

7.1 Local Radio overview (for inclusion in Annual Report)

Commenting on her report, Shelley Ward (link to BBC London 94.9) highlighted a strong quarter, with high appreciation for coverage of the “snow event” in London and ongoing coverage of credit crunch issues from a London perspective. There is now a good working relationship between the two breakfast show presenters and all weekday shows seem to be performing well. Weekend listening is in need of development – notably Sunday morning, where a number of presenters are being tried out.

Few other members listen to the station, generally preferring network radio programmes. Among that minority, members recognised –

- Strong competition from BBC network radio
- Agreement that weekday output is engaging
- Recognition that Sunday morning is a key area for development

[Members also reviewed the station at the September meeting, when they declared that it was fulfilling the requirements of its service licence. The Chair’s summary draws on that discussion as well as the update above]

Chair’s summary

BBC London 94.9 rose to the challenge presented by the recent “snow event”, attracting larger audiences by providing timely and reliable information not readily available elsewhere. Members felt the emergency had been covered “admirably” with the inclusion of increased travel reporting and content geared towards the weather conditions. Its coverage of credit-crunch related issues has also been appropriate and distinct from that offered by other BBC news services. When this Council reviewed the station in November, members felt that met service licence criteria and the Public Purposes. Since then breakfast and mid morning seem stronger, with figures indicating increasing audiences. Though a majority of members make national radio their first choice, they recognised some merit in this station’s output. Most felt that while in general weekdays were strong and consistent, weekend output was less so.

7.2 Generally Accepted Standards

Members were asked to watch an edition of *Panorama* broadcast immediately prior to the return of Jonathan Ross, considering strong language in television programmes. They also received a copy of Sue Perkins’ Huw Wheldon Lecture for the RTS in which she considered some content of current comedy output in relation to complaints processes.

Members’ individual comments:

- The BBC is ‘good’, offering appropriate standards, and the watershed works well.. It’s older people who think programmes are vulgar, with more violence, which they believe lower standards.
- The watershed? It’s all about context.. There is labelling and you can always switch off
- I’m concerned that most post 9pm programmes are explicit.

- I think there should be more labelling, specially if you're joining something part-way through. I want a warning triangle
- [the shared experience of] family viewing is still sought, but [for my family] explicit sex is alien to this – it makes people feel uncomfortable. There should be clearly-signposted family viewing time – and greater awareness of cultural differences among audiences.
- Family viewing is expected on mainstream channels and post-watershed programmes need not always be explicit. BBC One and Two [should be] acceptable to the majority.
- There's a major problem for me with pre-watershed programmes. Some of the recent themes in *EastEnders* have definitely not been suitable for children to see. I also think that body-image programmes have a bad influence on the young.
- There should be a second watershed, because parents don't police what their children watch after 9pm. And why does Jamie Oliver swear nowadays?
- I understand the watershed. Swearing is OK in an appropriate context, but not when there's no reason.
- The BBC has a responsibility to bear taste and decency in mind at all times and to be aware of the range of expectations [among the audience] Channel identity or profile is a key indicator of content. I agree that *EastEnders* has been too violent recently,. Sex and violence may have a place in a programme, but should not be the leading content. And I think the watershed should be at 10pm.

Chair's summary

Our discussion revealed a clear distinction between what younger and older audiences considered acceptable. Those with the greatest concerns wanted themed channels; others looked to BBC One for dedicated “family viewing” without explicit sex, also seeking a three-stage watershed; a third group felt that on-screen symbols might serve to advise viewers about content if they had joined a programme after the start. Departures from normal expectations of specific channels (notably BBC One) were particularly disturbing, whether or not they were announced. Members wished to protect their children from dark pre-watershed themes (e.g. long-running paedophile portrayal and recent violence in *EastEnders*) and programmes on body image, advocating that such content should not be shown until after 9pm. However, given the diverse views around the table, members did acknowledge the range of expectation among the audience, reminding programme-makers that strong language and portrayal of sex and violence should be appropriate, not gratuitous.

8. Outreach

The topic will be Generally Accepted Standards, with approximately 50 people, using programme extracts to stimulate discussion. The Accountability team are considering how best to ensure appropriate timing within published meeting dates.

9. Burning issues:

None

10. Any other business:

A disabled member highlighted access difficulties in attending this meeting, the result of one lift being out of action, denying access to appropriate toilet facilities. The experience was ironic in view of the agenda item about diversity, and recent experience over access to a *Question Time* recording, from which it was possible to deduce that the BBC was high on aspiration but low on fulfilment.

JS has asked House Services for an explanation and apology

11. Farewells and thanks to retiring members:

Christine Fanthome presented engraved glass mementoes to Patricia Adley, Paul Chapman and Christiana Ominiyi who had completed their terms of office. She also presented one to Amir Shah, who had recently joined BBC staff and was therefore ineligible to continue as an RAC member.

Christine thanked them all on behalf of the BBC Trust for their interest, work and commitment. Individual photographs were taken of each presentation.

12. Date of next meeting:

Monday 6 April 2009

Ends
10.09.09

Endnote

[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.]