

Regional Audience Council for BBC London

Meeting : Monday 3 November 2008
BBC Marylebone High Street

MINUTES

Present

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

BBC:

David Robey – Managing Editor BBC London 94.9
John Sparrow, Public Accountability Manager

Absent: Patricia Adley, Ivor John

1. Chair's welcome, introductions and apologies

Christine Fanthome welcomed everyone and introduced David Robey, who was deputising for Michael Macfarlane and responding to the council's review of BBC London 94.9.

Apologies were received from Patricia Adley and Ivor John.

2. Minutes: 16 September meeting and matters arising

Copies of the minutes had been distributed.

The meeting approved the content.

There were no matters arising.

3. Reports

3.1 Head of Region

Deputising for Mike Macfarlane, David Robey gave a verbal report.

He noted BBC London 94.9 successes at the recent Gillard Awards –

- Gold award for Vanessa Feltz programme

- Silver awards for Station of the Year, community programme and creativity (Danny Baker).

He highlighted

- effective coverage of Sir Ian Blair's resignation on local radio and regional television
- the London region contribution to Downturn Day (intended to give a regional assessment of the economy compared to the national picture)
- A steady stream of exclusive stories including foreign workers on the Olympic site and London cabs catching fire.

He also drew attention to an improved weather service for the London area, with dedicated forecasters.

3.2 Salford seminar

Christine Fanthome and two other council members attended this event on 21/22 September in Salford on behalf of the London council.

The development is a major commitment by the BBC, to accommodate significant strands of production out of London, in response to criticism that the BBC is too London-centric. The aim of the event was to inform RAC and ACE members about the aims and scope of the initiative, to hear what changes and differences might be expected in BBC output, to consider the impact on production elsewhere in the UK and to discuss points that arose from presentations.

An executive summary report and Christine Fanthome's impressions were circulated. The other delegates made the following observations:

- London members were aware of a significant anti-London sentiment among other delegates
- The potential contribution to the North West was recognised, but it was difficult to assess value for money without any insight into costing
- The site seemed to be anonymous, lacking vibrancy, instead feeling bleak, like an industrial estate. It also seemed that parking might be at a premium, though the area has a tram link. Members perceived these as potential disincentives for London staff considering transfer.
- Members' concern that the cost of BBC Sport's 2012 Olympics coverage would be increased because the department is one of those moving from London was not acknowledged by senior BBC staff.
- Many questions remained unanswered – notably what differences there might be on air. It was hoped that the project would stimulate creativity, though it was accepted that this might take some time.

The council wanted to know how services for London might be affected in future.

Action: JS to invite Caroline Thomson to attend the next meeting.

3.3 Question Time (QT) in Hackney

Two members attended, accompanied by John Sparrow and Laura Trustcott, (Accountability Manager for BBC South and South East). The aim is to raise council profile among a key group of licence-payers and listen to any significant concerns about the BBC. Members reported engaging conversations with the QT audience and a lively programme.

3.4 Voice of the Listener and Viewer seminar on public service broadcasting
Christine Fanthome attended this on behalf of the London council. Her summary was distributed.
Current Ofcom proposals to fund other broadcasters' public service content from the television licence fee were examined closely.

3.5 October Audience Council England (ACE) meeting (Bristol)

Draft minutes were circulated, with a letter of concern from ACE to the Chairman about the perceived shortcomings and consequences of the BBC decision to give only Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland a role on the BBC's Broadcast Direction Group.

Referring to the letter of concern, Christine asked members for their views. Most felt insufficiently briefed to form an opinion, seeking further clarification.
Action: JS to provide summary for info

4. Trust business

4.1 Restructuring announcement

See 3.5 above

4.2 Ofcom Public Service Broadcasting review

Two members are contributing to an ACE submission in response to Ofcom's latest paper on public service broadcasting. The deadline is 17 November. The process is being conducted via the Audience Council message board, which is proving a barrier to communication.

In the meantime, any other member with strong views is invited to forward them to either member and to John Sparrow by Friday 14 November at the latest.

5. Programme and service review

7.1 BBC London 94.9

A sampler CD, a briefing paper, the programme schedule and a summary of the station's service licence were distributed. Members were also asked to sample live output, notably the breakfast show, Vanessa, Eddie Nestor, and Christopher Biggins/Lesley Joseph (Sundays).

Breakfast:

A majority felt that the double-headed presentation had "settled down" to become a good double-act. Paul Ross added humour to the partnership.

Most also felt that it was easy to listen to, with a clear focus on London.

One member who generally prefers music radio commented that the programme had pace but was difficult to "get into", and that news was not as frequent as expected.

Vanessa Feltz

Individual comments included –

- Good at empathising with people

- Good radio
- She is radio
- A good range between light-hearted and serious
- Honest and a bit opinionated
- Better than the breakfast show.

Eddie Nestor without co-presenter

Four members preferred two presenters, two felt solo presentation was fine.

Christopher Biggins/Lesley Joseph

Mixed views, ranging from “engaging”; found it surprisingly good”; to “a pantomime act”; “too showbizzy and luvvy”.

Fulfilling the service licence

Referring particularly to the CD (which had been compiled as the station’s entry to the Gillard awards) members felt that the station met the criteria and the Public Purposes.

BBC response

David Robey explained that the younger audience target had been set to acknowledge the lower average age in the London area compared to areas served by BBC Local Radio elsewhere in England. Output was therefore tailored to meet the expectations of this audience demographic whilst fulfilling all the requirements of the service licence – notably an all-speech breakfast show. Older audiences appreciate speech content and tend to listen longer. The station must be complementary to other BBC services (e.g. BBC Radio 4)

7.2 *Silent Witness* – non-news contributions to the Citizenship purpose

These two episodes were chosen because they had a strong London-based narrative portraying gang and postcode culture in South London. At the end of the second episode a confidential helpline was offered for people who had been affected by anything they had seen in the drama.

- Most found the storyline depressing
- Some found it informative – “an accurate picture”; “..a side of London not often seen”; “a reality check from fiction”
- “an insight into [that] community; education through entertainment”

But members from ethnic minorities in particular felt it reinforced stereotypes:

- White people in charge, black people running riot
- A negative, no-hope portrayal of young people and their families.

Chair’s summary

With *Cathy Come Home* and other ground-breaking dramas in mind, it was valid for the London council to consider what contribution a drama might make to citizenship since the storyline in this production focused so specifically on an inner-city phenomenon. While there is no expectation that drama will provide a happy ending or positive outcome, when it portrays a bleak prospect in such a believable way, (albeit to explore the work of pathologists) the production must surely take responsibility for the possibility that it will be informing through entertainment. Whilst it was acknowledged that for people far removed from London life this

programme might provide an insight into the realities of youth gangs, the strong view of the council was that it would reinforce stereotypes, serving if anything to perpetuate urban myths – the antithesis of a contribution to citizenship.

6. Outreach

6.1 Young people (13-16) outreach

John Sparrow reported that the initial group he had identified had been unable to enthuse the children in the project, resulting in only one response, from participants who were over 16. Alternative proposals from two council members are now being pursued.

7. Burning issues/any other business

7.1 Access to BBC audience programmes

One member, who was unable to attend a *Question Time* (QT) recording at St Johns, Smith Square because the venue did not meet Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requirements, highlighted the general question of public access to BBC audience programmes at the September meeting.

John Sparrow raised the specific instance with Mentorn Midlands, the independent company that produces QT for the BBC. He was assured that the producer in charge of locations was fully aware both of DDA and BBC requirements for access. The choice of St John's had been relatively last minute, driven by the political agenda, and the only venue available that was suitable for the recording. The production team were emphatic that no QT audience member had ever been denied access through disability.

Christine Fanthome proposed sending an e-mail to the production company noting the Council's concern about access.

Action JS

7.2 The Brand/Ross affair

Russell Brand's BBC Radio 2 programme on Saturday 18 October had featured Jonathan Ross as a guest. As usual, it was pre-recorded. The actor Andrew Sachs had agreed to take part by phone. When called, the programme was only able to contact Sachs' answerphone. The messages Brand and Ross put on the answerphone were recorded for broadcast, though heavily edited before transmission. Sachs had reportedly asked for none of the phone messages to be broadcast. There had been two listener complaints to the BBC about the programme. Then the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Daily Mail* took up the issue, prompting some 30K complaints. Brand and Ross apologised individually; Tim Davie, Director BBC Audio and Music (director, BBC Radio) responded to media enquiries, giving his apology, then Mark Thompson, BBC Director General, took over on his return from holiday.

Russell Brand resigned, BBC management suspended Jonathan Ross from all his programmes for three months [at a reported loss of £1m] and the controller of Radio 2, Lesley Douglas, also resigned. The BBC Trust had called for a report from BBC management, which was given on Thursday 30 October 2008. [on-air apologies

were broadcast on Saturday 8 November at the normal times of the Ross and Brand shows]

a) members' comments:

- The BBC reacted too slowly
- Three members felt that the BBC should have “stood up for the content”.
- Three felt that it “..should not be on the BBC”., with one other feeling that the content did not match the expectations of the Radio 2 audience.
- In discussion, members agreed that the phone call had touched on a taboo subject, even though Sachs, age 78, was likely to be aware of his grand-daughter's activities.
- The public's response seems to be largely age-driven [younger people apparently not bothered, older ones offended and outraged]
- Seemed like an opportunity to give Jonathan Ross “a good kicking”.

b) Individual observations

- It's the BBC's responsibility to maintain standards [and presumably therefore to manage talent hired to push boundaries]
- The BBC is an institution. There are different standards and expectations.
- This will be very damaging, because the BBC won't be brave any more, especially since politicians got involved. [Prime Minister & Leader of Opposition had commented] / a concern that the media will be “buttoned down”.

BBC response

David Robey reminded the meeting that the BBC had declared the broadcast unacceptable and that its editorial guidelines had been breached. He noted that rigorous compliance procedures already existed, but had apparently not been followed in this instance. The main issue is therefore to understand how this lapse had occurred. As part of the wider response he anticipates more training on procedures and a general review of taste and decency thresholds. He also felt that relations between the BBC/its controllers, talent and independent producers would be examined.

Chair's summary

Almost without reference to the actual content, this incident polarised the council, largely by age, suggesting irreconcilable differences in taste and tolerance. The momentum created by the popular press served to highlight the BBC's apparent inability to contain or manage a crisis – their responses were slow, reactive and begrudging. The bigger issue that lay behind the immediate controversy was Jonathan Ross's high salary, [confirmed when his loss of earnings for three months work was given as £1m]. This was a golden opportunity to register an objection, however blunt or illogical the method. Fostering innovation is a valued role of the BBC, and it is important not to inhibit this. However, in this instance the line was crossed, BBC guidelines were breached and the outcome was unacceptable.

7.3 BBC coverage of current financial issues

Prompted by David Robey's reference to “Downturn Day”, members wanted to discuss whether the extent and intensity of financial coverage had made the situation worse.

- Coverage perceived as “OTT”, with no apparent balance
- Many found it depressing

BBC response

David Robey explained that the range and scope of developments meant that this was the worst financial situation for over 10 years, with real fears about a domino effect. However he recognised the risk of over-dramatisation and tried to reflect developments without fuelling the fire. In his output he tried to answer the question “Is it affecting you?” and to be careful about how that question was asked. He admitted to being uneasy about the title “Downturn Day” but some people were genuinely affected by current problems. He also reminded members that sentiment is an element in the “credit crunch” – confidence (or lack of it) being based on ephemeral things such as commentators’ blogs.

7.4 Entertainment research

Four members agreed to take part in reviewing the proposed “toolkit” being devised by researchers from the London Metropolitan University as part of the Audience Council England’s continuing work on the importance of entertainment programmes to audiences.

Action: JS to arrange meeting

9. Date of next meeting:

Monday 12 January 2009

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.]