

**North East and Cumbria Regional Audience Council**  
Minutes of the 12 January 2007 meeting

**Present:** Sue Kelly                      Chair  
Ken Blackwood  
Liz Dodds  
Frank Swinhoe  
Tony Gillan  
Arthur Renwick  
Hemant Desai

**Apologies:** Richard Salkeld  
Martyn Jackson  
Hannah Eyres  
Colin Boothroyd

**BBC Representatives:**  
Wendy Pilmer                      Head of BBC North East and Cumbria  
Andy Cooper                      Editor, *Look North*  
Maggie McCarthy                Public Accountability Manager

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## 1. CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME & APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Sue Kelly welcomed members to this, the first meeting of the Regional Audience Council, so termed, following the transition of the accountability structure to the BBC Trust. The work of the Audience Councils would see greater definition and separation from BBC Management. Today's meeting would include a private session on the BBC's i-Player proposal.

## 2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING AND MATTERS ARISING

Members noted Jacqui Hodgson's appearance on BBC ONE's *Newswatch* programme. The programme had offered a Cumbrian viewer the chance to air his view that Cumbria did not receive the appropriate proportion of news coverage from the BBC North East & Cumbria team. The viewer expressed concern that the programme seemed to focus on other, urban parts of the region.

*Newswatch* scrutinised a random edition of the programme and then asked Jacqui Hodgson to reply as Acting Head of Region.

Members noted Jacqui Hodgson's very straightforward and clear response. There had been no attempt to fudge the issue. In the response, Jacqui had explained the news agenda values and choices employed in a newsroom, the coverage that was generally achieved and a recognition that the BBC itself would like to cover Cumbria far more. Looking ahead, it was hoped that Local TV, should it pass the public value test scrutiny, would allow the BBC to reflect Cumbria more closely.

Council members who had seen the reports felt that it was an honest and very accountable response from the BBC and had not aimed to be defensive.

Liz Dodds noted that she would also like to see more reflection of Cumbria.

### 3. PROGRAMME REVIEW

#### (i) Network BBC News

Comments from the council included:

- BBC News was authoritative and reliable.
- The 6pm broadcast did not offer much depth.
- 'Please don't become too Americanised in presentation'.
- News 24 had come into its own.
- Technology was very good but some powerpoint presentations were simplistic.
- Why stand outside closed buildings after hours simply to show 'live reporting'?
- International news was excellent.

Summary: The council noted that they felt the BBC news was of a high standard. Each news programme had a clearly defined remit. The council warned against the 'glamourising' of news and the use of sensationalist headlines – something that seemed to be happening to news across the media. Single headed news presentation was generally preferred. The council warned against including too many celebrity-led news items. The council felt that regional BBC journalists should be called upon to report on stories when they hit the national agenda.

International news was well covered though some members called for more on Asian countries; there seemed to be a bias on the traditional superpowers.

Some members felt that broadcasting the interview with a chief suspect in the Ipswich murder investigation had been inappropriate.

***Action: The BBC response to this issue to be distributed.***

#### (ii) Business Coverage

Comments from the council included:

- BBC Business coverage was of a high standard.
- *Business Lunch* and BBC's *Breakfast* business section were outstanding.
- In a wider sense, there was not enough general reporting of the impact of other economies in the world such as India and China.
- The more that coverage could open up business issues and relate them to everyday life, the better.
- More signposting for extended in-depth coverage would be useful.

One member wondered how much scrutiny was offered to editorial decisions of sensitive stories.

BBC Response: Wendy Pilmer noted with interest the preference for single presenter news presentation. She agreed that more coverage of international economies might be achieved. Wendy noted the comment on reporters standing outside government buildings after close of business but said that the aim was to show that the news was coming from around the country and around the world and not just a BBC studio.

BBC journalists had to ensure that their reports met clearly laid out editorial policy guidelines. Those guidelines were often set above current media law and involved mandatory discussions with the BBC's Editorial Policy Unit on issues of a very serious nature. Even set against these types of checks, mistakes could still happen. When they did, it was important for the BBC to hold up its hands.

(iii) Look North

- The programme connected with its audience.
- Carol Malia was an excellent presenter.
- Business and industry stories were featured prominently and it was noted that the definition of 'business' should be appropriately broad, rather than a narrow interpretation, eg share prices.
- One member wondered why some 'jobs loss' stories featured and others didn't – where did the *Look North* team set the bar for inclusion?
- The programme moved at a pace.
- A good balance of serious and lighter stories was achieved.
- More co-operation with BBC Yorkshire resulting in more stories had been noticed.
- One member felt that sport had appeared to move to the middle of the programme.
- The news seemed 'harder' to members than its ITV competitors.

BBC Response: Andy Cooper noted that it was good to hear compliments. The region was a large one, and it was good to note that geographic coverage had improved. It was important to establish a regional angle on stories which hit the national agenda. Business stories which often made the regional news included severe job losses or gains. The impact of business discussions on the region was explored in as much depth as possible. Maintaining a high standard of regional news was extremely important to the BBC.

Andy Cooper left the meeting at this point.

*(iv) Sports Personality of the Year*

Comments from the council included:

- Good contribution from the presenters.
- The 'unsung hero' award was an important contribution.
- Pacey, kept to time.
- Repetition of names and voting numbers was irritating.
- The programme reflected a relatively uneventful year in British sporting achievement.

Summary: The council felt that the inclusion of a live audience helped establish an anticipatory atmosphere. The introduction of past winners worked well. The use of a live orchestra was not so successful and it was particularly annoying when the music did not cut off appropriately after the start of interviews.

The presenters were professional showing both a relaxed approach and good humour. Members asked to know more about the voting system and particularly, how the revenue from phone voting was used. Wendy Pilmer noted that Charles Runcie (the BBC's Head, Regional Sport) would be attending the next meeting and would be able to answer this question.

#### 4. BBC LOCAL RADIO REVIEW

Maggie McCarthy explained that one of the aims of the new local accountability arrangements was to lessen the burden on the Local Audience Forum representatives than they previously carried as Local Advisory Council Chairmen. LAF representatives were not expected to produce formal reports but were asked, where possible, to attend the public events organised by the station and give their impressions of the event and main issues raised. This would be supported by formal reports produced by the station team.

It was decided that perhaps the best way to ensure a thorough review of Local Radio in the region was to take each one in turn, starting with Radio Cleveland at the next meeting.

Wendy Pilmer outlined the role of BBC Local Radio. Broadly, the service was aimed at listeners in their fifties so as not to overlap with other station strategies. The service had a speech and music mix but was not a music network. The service should reflect and celebrate the area, with localness running through the output. Overall, there was an aim to limit the number of shared programmes. The three stations in the region were very different from one another as they each aimed to reflect their particular listener patch.

#### 5. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Sue Kelly noted that the first Audience Council England meeting would take place at the end of January, chaired by the new Trustee for England, Alison Hastings. Alison's career had included a period as the Editor of the Newcastle Chronicle. She now lived in Merseyside.

## 6. BBC HEAD OF REGION'S REPORT

Wendy Pilmer had just one piece of follow-up information from the December meeting and that was the news of a recently announced commission of a 13 part children's drama series for CBBC. The series, to be broadcast in 2008, would be filmed in the North East. This was an important step following the decision to discontinue *Byker Grove*.

Wendy Pilmer left the meeting at this point.

Sue Kelly noted the end of the meeting which was the last to be minuted by Maggie McCarthy. Carol Cooke would take over the role of Public Accountability Manager for the North East & Cumbria region in the following few weeks.

A private session then followed to fulfil the BBC Trust's request for formal discussion on the BBC's i-Player proposal. (See appendix.)

## 7. DATE AND MAIN BUSINESS OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was circulated.

**Main Business:**       Regional Sport on TV and Radio  
                              Annual Report (06-07) – t.b.c.  
                              BBC Radio Cleveland output

## Appendix: North East & Cumbria RAC i-Player discussion

1. **What value do you think the proposals would create for you and other consumers?**
  - It would offer flexibility of viewing options.
  - Perhaps of significantly more value to highly computer literate younger people.
  - Would allow greater public freedom of access to BBC programmes.
  - In this proposal no extra cost to users other than the licence fee.
  
2. **What value or impact do you think the proposals would create for or make on society as a whole?**
  - It may marginalise older/less computer-literate people.
  - It could encourage people to change their viewing habits.
  - It may help to reach younger audiences.
  
3. **Do you think the proposals would provide value for money?**
  - Within the market context of other channels charging for access, the BBC proposal would provide further value for the licence fee.
  
4. **Image a scenario in which most broadcasters are offering on-demand services. Would you like the BBC to be investing in the described on-demand service proposals too or would you prefer the BBC to be offering its existing services only?**
  - A difficult call to answer. The aspiration should be for the BBC to meet the market standard and not fall behind in delivery. But if the licence fee settlement requires cost-cutting, the BBC may be forced to step away from this proposal.
  - It is the view of the council that the BBC has to remain market relevant.
  
5. **Could you see the new service as a replacement and development of any of the BBC's existing services?**
  - It could replace DVDs/videos – but the market is already moving towards convergence, where screens will allow computer access/multi-channel TV/digital radio/photograph viewing. Public consumption will move towards convergence regardless of BBC activity.
  
6. **What downsides do you see to the proposals?**
  - Broadband will be a pre-requisite. Although take-up in the UK is currently high (approaching 70%) some rural areas are still at a disadvantage. Those served by unviable Broadband Exchanges stand to lose out. The infrastructure needs further investment.
  - Will diverting licence fee revenue into this new service affect the spend on core BBC services?
  - One member questioned the choice of Windows Media Player 10 and asked if the data detailing user choice could be used by Sony Microsoft.

7. We know from earlier consultation that series stacking is an issue of concern to some stakeholders.
  - Please offer as much material as possible. Try not to limit this service.
  
8. Are there any specifically English or regional issues the Trust should consider?
  - Rural area broadband concerns as outlined above.
  - Would offer potentially, a greater accessibility to regional programmes, but perhaps unlikely that viewers would want to access old editions of their regional news. Local TV offers a greater impact for local viewers.
  
9. What is your general impression of the service proposals?
  - A good idea.
  - Are there other cheaper platforms than Windows Media Player 10?
  - Could the BBC use a password protected system to restrict access to licence payers? For non licence-payers (i.e. those mostly living outside the UK) a fee could be required, so providing the BBC with another stream of income.
  
10. Are there any other issues you would like to feed into the consultation?
  - No other issues noted.

*ends*