

**BBC Audience Council Northern Ireland  
Advice to the BBC Trust Service Review of  
BBC Network News and Current Affairs  
December 2013**

## **1. Summary**

The Audience Council has engaged closely with different sections of the audience in Northern Ireland to understand the range of views about BBC Network News and Current Affairs. Overall, BBC News and Current Affairs is highly appreciated by many sections of the audience in Northern Ireland and is at the heart of the BBC's public role. Audiences have high expectations of BBC News and have identified a number of areas where it could do even more to serve its audiences.

The Audience Council considers that the BBC's focus should be on maintaining its core values and building on its distinctive public service role. It particularly wishes the Trust to consider a number of key themes raised by audiences in Northern Ireland, as outlined below.

**Core values :** Core values associated with BBC News included impartiality, accuracy, quality, range, depth, authority and professionalism, trust and expertise.

**Impartiality and accuracy :** Most people we spoke with placed a high level of trust in the accuracy and impartiality of BBC News across its platforms and services, although some sections of the audience perceive some bias in output, more often, but not exclusively, in favour of the left. We recognise the complex range of factors which inform audience views of impartiality. We consider that the BBC should continue to be committed to the highest standards of impartiality and accuracy, and it should work to find effective ways to demonstrate this to its audiences.

**Range :** Audiences we spoke with view the range of stories reported by the BBC as a core strength. International news, and the network of correspondents which supports this, is highly regarded and some audiences would like the BBC to bring more of its world news to the UK audience. Audiences generally consider that the BBC covers a wide range of topics. However, certain subjects such as politics, home affairs, economics and sport tend to predominate and the BBC could do more on television to provide depth in areas such as science, technology and Europe. Audiences suggested that there is an opportunity to season TV bulletins a little more with less frequently covered subjects, as the story merits. BBC News could also do more to identify stories 'from the ground up' rather than relying unduly on major institutions and press releases.

**Breadth of opinion and diversity :** Audiences generally recognise that the BBC provides a good range of voices and views across its news services. Some sections of the audience consider that there are opportunities to further enhance breadth of opinion, for instance by seeking more external views and expertise, from a wider diversity of contributors. BBC News could also reflect a greater diversity of people on air : women and disabled people were among the groups considered to be less well represented.

**Aggressive interviewing :** One of the most recurrent themes raised by audiences relates to interviewing techniques which they consider unnecessarily aggressive eg interrupting contributors too often and too early. Audiences consider that this can diminish the quality of the debate and may even raise concerns about impartiality and breadth of opinion. Whilst many programmes do not draw criticism in this regard, those that do include some high profile flagship offerings that inform wider perceptions of BBC News.

**Young audiences :** We ask the Trust to particularly consider the needs of younger audiences, in their teens and twenties. Although some of the BBC's offerings tailored to this group are well received, their news needs as a whole do not appear to be fully met.

**Changing technology and consumption patterns :** The BBC needs to keep up with changing technology and consumption patterns. It needs a clear approach to social media and should work to ensure that audiences are aware when content through third parties originates from the BBC and adheres to its values.

**Reporting the devolved nations :** Reporting of devolution in the UK, and the range of approaches to public policy, has improved significantly since the Trust's review of this aspect of BBC reporting. However, audiences see more scope for enriching content with comparisons of policies and approaches from different parts of the UK, especially as devolution evolves and the debate gathers pace.

**BBC News Channel :** The channel appears to be valued by its audiences, although some suggest that there is a little too much repetition, even within their expectations of a rolling news format.

**Value for money :** We heard that overall audiences consider that the News portfolio provides very good value for money, although some see scope for further efficiencies. The BBC should continue to challenge itself to deliver efficiencies where possible and might also do more to explain its costs and resourcing decisions.

Of these, the Audience Council prioritises the following :

- Reporting the devolved nations
- Reflecting a greater diversity and breadth of opinion
- Continuing to adapt to changes in technology and consumption patterns, particularly but not solely, with regard to younger audiences
- Reining in unnecessarily aggressive interviewing
- Demonstrating how the BBC delivers against its commitments to impartiality and accuracy

## 2. Key Themes and Audience Council Advice to the Trust

**Consumption of News in Northern Ireland :** The appetite for news in Northern Ireland is very high : 9 in 10 adults consume news each week, which is similar to the UK average. However, people in Northern Ireland tend to use a wider range of news sources. Ofcom reports that Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people in the UK using each platform – TV, radio, online and newspapers. TV continues to be by far the most important platform for most people. Use of tablets and mobile phones is relatively high and people in Northern Ireland are significantly more likely than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK to use Facebook for news or share news-related clips online. Interestingly, word of mouth is also much more important as a source of news than elsewhere in the UK.<sup>i</sup>

This appetite for news is fed by a significant range of news sources - from the UK, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Interest in local news is especially high, as evidenced by the consumption of Northern Ireland TV and radio news as well as the local press. This can impact on choices of UK-wide and international news sources.

The BBC is a very important provider of news in Northern Ireland : Ofcom research in 2013 indicates that 47 % of adults in Northern Ireland rated the BBC as the most important source of news with ITN as the next most important at 26 %. This is still slightly lower than the UK average for the BBC (53%), which may reflect the volume and range of news sources consumed.<sup>ii</sup>

**Overall Assessment :** BBC Network News and Current Affairs is highly appreciated by many sections of the audience in Northern Ireland and is at the heart of the BBC's public service role. Audiences have high expectations of BBC News and have suggested a number of ways in which it could do even more to serve its audiences, and deliver its Public Purposes.

**Quality and distinctiveness :** Overall, the majority of audiences we spoke with value the BBC as an important source of news, which many access on a daily basis. Audiences generally appreciate the quality of BBC News overall and have high expectations of its public service role. Many sections of the audience consider that BBC News compares favourably with other providers, in respect of its core values and the benefits of being free of adverts. Others make less distinction between the main news broadcasters, and some people prefer a particular approach, such as the range and depth of analysis, and the presentation style, offered by Channel 4 News.

Core values associated with BBC News included impartiality, accuracy, quality, range, depth, authority and professionalism, trust and expertise. Audiences expect these values to be applied across the range of BBC platforms and services.

The BBC's reputation and value as a global news provider also adds significantly to UK audiences' appreciation of the brand, especially with regard to impartiality and accuracy, quality, and the standard and scope of its international reporting.

**Impartiality and accuracy :** Impartiality and accuracy are highly prized and absolutely critical to the value of BBC News for its audiences. Expectations of the BBC are especially high in this regard. We heard much impassioned debate on the subject of impartiality from a wide range of perspectives. Most people we spoke with placed a high level of trust in the accuracy and impartiality of BBC News across the various platforms and services. However, some people perceived an element of bias, more often, but not exclusively, in favour of the left. A number of audience members observed that the range of conflicting perspectives – in the context of much wider satisfaction - was in itself a good indication that the BBC was getting it right. It is also testimony to the value which audiences and society place on impartial news and the degree of scrutiny which is applied to the BBC.

*"The BBC must be doing a good job if one person thinks the BBC is Tory and someone else thinks Labour"*, Discussion in Newry, September 2013

We note the complex range of factors which inform audience perspectives of impartiality, as well as the important work carried out by the BBC Trust and Executive to ensure that the BBC works to the highest standards in this regard. The BBC must continue to be committed, above all, to the highest standards of impartiality and accuracy. It is also important that the BBC finds effective ways to demonstrate its impartiality to audiences, perhaps doing more to listen to the range of views, to explain its approach, to reference its evidence base and to demonstrate how it scrutinises and tests information (the Channel 4 fact checker was considered a good example in this regard). This should be achieved in a manner that does not eclipse the story.

**Breadth of opinion and diversity :** Audiences that we spoke with generally recognise that BBC News and Current Affairs provides a significant range of voices and views across the wide range of programmes and services, particularly on radio where there are benefits of longer programme durations. However, a range of different audience groups believe that there is scope to include a greater breadth of opinion across major and enduring themes of public interest, perhaps particularly on TV.

It was observed that there are opportunities to engage a wider diversity of expert contributors, beyond elected representatives and key institutions. We also heard from audiences who consider that the BBC sometimes relies too much on its own specialist correspondents, and could benefit from seeking more external views and expertise. It was suggested that in some instances contributors could be used more effectively – from selecting the most appropriate people from a more diverse base, to ensuring that they are well equipped to explain complex subjects in accessible and relevant ways.

There was also a view – again from different sections of the audience – that BBC News and Current Affairs should represent a wider diversity of people on air (and probably off air as well). Women and disabled people were among the groups thought to be less well represented. Audiences were quick to emphasise the benefits to the range and depth of BBC News' expertise, as well as the enhanced connection with its diverse audiences. We welcome some important developments in this regard, such as the Trust's Impartiality Review of Breadth of Opinion and the Expert Women initiative. We would like to see BBC

News become even more distinctive through the range of perspectives that it offers, adding insight to debate and contributing to the impartiality and indeed accuracy of coverage.

**Focus on facts** : Audiences particularly value BBC News for its clear presentation of the facts. For some people this is a point of distinction from some other news services which they feel tend to sensationalise or speculate. This is especially the case when news stories are breaking, when a significant proportion of people appear to turn to the BBC to validate the facts.

*"Impartiality and accuracy are the bedrock of BBC News. It needs to keep to these standards. I don't really believe a big news story until I hear it on the BBC News."*

Discussion with CSV Media Trainees, October 2013

*"Any website can be first ... and wrong."*

Discussion about BBC Online, including news, with Co Down sixth formers, November 2012

*"People talk about how over the top the news has got, but the BBC tells you just the news ... what it is without blowing the story up."*

Newry, September 2013

There is a clear consensus among audiences that the BBC should maintain the highest standards of accuracy and impartiality, even where this means that it is not necessarily the first to break news.

**Aggressive interviewing** : One of the most recurrent themes raised by audiences relates to interviewing techniques which they consider unnecessarily aggressive eg interrupting contributors too often and too early. Audiences consider that this impacts on the quality of the debate, generating more heat than light about the subject of the discussion. It was also interesting to understand audiences' wider concerns, for instance that this approach can generate sympathy for an interviewee or infer that the BBC holds a partial position. Others were concerned that such programmes sought controversy to heighten their profile and reach a wider audience. There is also a concern that this approach may narrow the range of people prepared to contribute to a debate, so that the full range of significant views is not adequately reflected. Whilst many programmes do not draw criticism in this regard, those that do include some high profile flagship offerings which inform wider perceptions of BBC News.

We agree that the BBC must continue to exercise a strong challenge function, especially for those in public positions and adept at handling the media. This should be balanced with the ability to draw out the wider range of views, including, as appropriate, less controversial and more positive perspectives .

**Range** : Audiences we spoke with view the range of stories reported by BBC News as a core strength. Many trust the BBC to update them on all the important issues of the day. The range and depth of analysis on BBC radio news and current affairs is considered particularly strong, drawing on its greater airtime.

We heard broad support for the mix of international, UK-wide and local stories on network news. Indeed the network of news correspondents across the globe is considered a major strength for the BBC and many people commented on the expertise, in depth knowledge and insights that foreign correspondents brought to their reports. A number of people would like to see the BBC bring more of its international output to a UK audience. There was also a suggestion from some that international news tended to focus a little too much on stories relating to the USA.

Audiences we spoke to generally thought that the range of subjects covered by the BBC was good. Politics, economics, finance, sport, health and home affairs were perceived to predominate. Audiences welcomed the depth of knowledge and expertise shown by specialist correspondents, although a number thought that there could be a better balance with external contributors. It was also suggested by different groups that some other topics such as Europe, science and technology were covered in less depth, even though there was some recognition of the additional impetus given to science and arts and culture coverage in recent years.

Some people we spoke with thought that television bulletins could be seasoned a little more often with other less frequently covered subjects, as the story merits. It was also suggested that the BBC is not as strong at covering major stories on more specialist subjects - engineering or architecture, for example. We heard that audiences do not expect the BBC to have specialist correspondents on all subjects. However, a number of people consider that on these occasions the BBC could do more to equip itself to ask the right questions and identify the most relevant expert contributors, so that the real significance and insights of the story are illuminated. Some people thought that the BBC overplayed stories about celebrities or leading viewers to other BBC programmes, and could use this time more effectively to provide a greater range and depth of stories.

Some other people thought that was more scope to explore the range of issues relevant to a topic, rather than looking at the different aspects (eg economic, social, environmental) separately. We also heard from people who thought that BBC News could identify more stories 'from the ground up', rather than relying unduly on high level institutions and press releases for stories. It was observed that network news could learn a lot from local news in this regard, and such an approach might also address some concerns that the more positive stories tend to be overlooked.

Interestingly, although audiences we spoke with expect the hard news to be covered first and foremost, there is still interest in and affection for the occasional softer and more positive 'and finally' item.

There was a notable degree of consensus among different audience groups with regard to the BBC's role in covering celebrity culture. Generally audiences consider that, whilst the BBC should not be totally isolated from celebrity culture, it should set a high bar to ensure that stories merit coverage, and leave the rest to other providers.

**BBC News Online :** This service is highly valued by its users as a means to provide access to high level information and breaking news on demand, and often 'on the go'. Many people are content to access news in brief online and will go to other sources for more in depth content.

**Young audiences :** We ask the Trust to particularly consider the needs of younger audiences – in their teens and twenties – when assessing the service and considering its future development. We note the value that *60 Second News*, *Newsbeat*, *Newsround* (a CBBC programme) and BBC Online deliver for young people. We are also aware of the contribution that some non-news programmes, eg *Russell Howard's Good News* on BBC Three, make to engaging young audiences in news topics. However, we have spoken with a considerable range of audiences in this age group and are keenly aware of the view that their news needs and interests are not wholly met, and that this gap is likely to grow. In the context of the vast amount of information available to audiences these days, there is a particular need for a trusted guide that is responsive to changing consumption patterns and preferences. Key issues include access to news, relevant content and formats, social media and interactivity.

*"Trending enables young people to get to grips with BBC news and talk about it."*  
CSV Media Trainees, October 2013

**Changing technology and consumption patterns :** It is by no means only young people who access news in new digital ways. Although television and radio are still important, digital forms of output are becoming increasingly popular and the BBC offer needs to keep up with these trends. The feedback we received suggests that new ways of accessing content also impacts on audience expectations, with higher expectations of interactivity and comment, full use of digital formats and advanced curation of content.

*"Facebook and Twitter allow you to comment and share. There are not many BBC apps which enable audiences to comment."*

*"The BBC doesn't have conversations with its audiences."*  
Discussion with CSV Media Trainees, Belfast, about BBC Online, 2012

Audiences have observed that the BBC's use of social media and user generated content is patchy and this is one area where we suggest the BBC needs a clear approach, in line with a wider strategy for the future direction of the service. We are also mindful that some new channels for content eg Twitter and Facebook still rely on traditional providers for much of their news content. We suggest that plans for developing BBC News' digital offer (eg social media, syndicated content) takes account of opportunities to make audiences aware that the content has come from the BBC and adheres to its values.

**Reporting the devolved nations :** Audiences in Northern Ireland want BBC Network News to fully reflect the devolved nations, and use the different policies and approaches in each to inform the national debate on key issues.

*“There is a big devolution experiment within the UK ... the BBC should report issues that are happening in this devolved government experiment ...”*

Discussion in Newry, September 2013

Many have noticed the positive impact of the Trust’s review of BBC reporting of devolved issues<sup>iii</sup>, particularly with regard to accuracy and labelling in reports. There is now a much clearer understanding of which jurisdiction(s) a particular report is relevant to. However, there are still occasional circumstances where a report references England, Scotland and Wales but not Northern Ireland, and it can appear to audiences that Northern Ireland is not as fully integrated into reporting of the UK.

There has also been a noticeable increase in the number and range of stories about Northern Ireland on the BBC’s networks, perhaps especially on Radio 4. However, the view that network news is still too heavily weighted towards England (and perhaps the SE of England) still seems quite widespread. Audiences are also concerned about the range of stories about Northern Ireland which tend, perhaps particularly on TV News, to focus more on security issues and political and community divisions.

*“Question Time is a very broad-based programme elsewhere in the UK ... why not here? ... we always miss out on more general social and economic things”*

Discussion in Londonderry, September 2013

*“Nationally, we are only covered when the news is bad. There are a few exceptions recently around City of Culture events and The Fleadh.”*

Discussion in Newry, September 2013

There has been some progress in comparing policies and approaches in different parts of the UK, but this is an area where audiences see significant scope for further improvement. This would more fully and accurately reflect the nations, regions and communities in the UK and also add significantly to the range of perspectives and quality of the debate on key policy issues. The feedback we received suggests that improvements in this regard would also do much to engage audiences by helping them to understanding the relevance of a report to their community and to consider the alternative approaches.

*“Does anyone in Northern Ireland know what the health system in e.g. England is like and how it relates to the health system here in NI? ... why not help educate people about what it is like across the UK so that they can develop informed opinions about what people in Northern Ireland have or need ....”*

Comment at BBC Experience event, Lisburn, October 2013

The Audience Council notes that, as devolution continues to evolve and the debate gathers pace, it is even more important to contribute depth and insight to the debate and to reflect changing realities for audiences around the UK.

**Television Current Affairs :** Audiences appreciate the BBC’s current affairs offering across different services and programmes. *Newsnight* continues to be valued by its audience for the depth and intelligence of its reporting and analysis and the expertise and depth of



knowledge of its reporters, although audiences consider it makes less contribution to investigative journalism than it used to prior to the Savile affair. *Panorama* is valued for its accessible exploration of important topics within the early evening schedule. We did hear some 'top of mind' views that the BBC's leading role in TV current affairs has diminished somewhat in recent years, with programmes such as Channel 4's *Dispatches* making more of an impact. We therefore asks the Trust to consider the range of relevant audience evidence and form a view on whether BBC TV current affairs could achieve even greater impact with audiences.

**BBC Parliament :** Although the channel has a small audience it is highly valued by its viewers and offers considerable public value. The wider audience – when it is aware of the channel - tends to understand the public value of such a service, even if they do not use it themselves. We did notice, however, that audiences are not always aware of *Democracy Live* and perhaps more could be done to promote the online service.

**BBC News Channel :** The feedback we received suggests that the News Channel is generally valued by its audiences who consider that it delivers the core values of BBC News. A number of people thought that it was too repetitive, even within the expectations of a rolling news service. The Audience Council asks the Trust to consider if this is a widespread view, and whether any enhancements are required.

**Value for money :** Overall audiences we spoke with consider that the BBC provides very good value for money across its extensive portfolio. They want the BBC to continue to invest in the high quality and wide range of news and current affairs programmes and services as a top priority.

We are also aware, however, that a variety of people consider there is still scope for efficiencies and that these perceptions are very important in informing their wider view of the BBC's stewardship of their licence fee. For example, a number of people questioned the value of reporting from a location on occasions where being at the scene did not seem to add any material value; or the number of staff required to report a major event being covered by a number of services.

We note that the BBC Trust will carry out a detailed assessment of value for money as part of the service review. We recognise the balance to be sought between reducing costs and providing high quality and engaging news across a wide range of services. We are also very mindful that the true cost of delivering such a wide range of services is not always fully apparent to audiences. Nevertheless, the BBC should continue to challenge itself to deliver efficiencies wherever possible, without materially impacting on the quality and range of services. We also think that BBC News (and indeed the BBC in general) could do more to explain its costs and its resourcing decisions.

### **3. Evidence Base**

This year the Audience Council engaged with a range of different audience groups to understand their views about BBC Network News and Current Affairs. It hosted discussions

with representatives of local organisations as well as members of the public in Derry and Newry. Members also engaged with a group of media trainees based in Belfast and journalism students in Derry, a Co Down Probus group, and community-based groups in Dungannon and Carrickfergus. They heard views from visitors to a BBC Experience Event in Lisburn and also from journalism students at a school in Portadown, who undertook a project on TV News and Current Affairs.

We have also drawn on feedback from its programme of engagement throughout Northern Ireland in recent years, and through members' own networks. It has carefully assessed this feedback in light of its understanding of the services' strategies and performance, and the BBC's Public Purposes.

We are grateful to everyone who has provided us with views and insights into audience expectations of BBC News, and how well these are met.

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<sup>i</sup> *News Consumption in the UK, 2013* : Ofcom

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/editorial\\_standards/impartiality/network\\_news.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/network_news.html)