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Public Service Broadcasting in Northern Ireland:

Research Monitoring Report – 2023

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November 2023



Executive Summary

1. Public Service Broadcasting in Northern Ireland is in a fairly healthy state, but there are various ways it could be strengthened, and issues remain that require further scrutiny;
2. Usage and satisfaction rates remain very high, in an environment where Public Service Broadcasting services are often written off by their critics as being irrelevant;
3. The continual refrain that Public Service Broadcasting is nearing obsolescence due to the rise of streaming platforms, and increased viewer choice, is simply not borne out in the data;
4. BBC News is under continual pressure from a range of critics. However, that it remains so central to news consumption in Northern Ireland is a salient reminder of its remaining social and cultural importance;
5. UTV is fundamental to news consumption in Northern Ireland. Policy attention and academic scrutiny should be redoubled in relation to the role of the broadcaster;
6. The fact that spending by the BBC and UTV in the “non-network first-run UK-originated content for Northern Ireland” has not recovered to 2019 levels is concerning. In terms of hours, the 11% decrease over a six year period at the BBC is disappointing, while UTV’s decrease is much more marginal;
7. Outside of the BBC, there is very limited attention paid to Northern Ireland in the annual reports of the Public Service Broadcasters;
8. A number of issues that are pertinent to a discussion of Public Service Broadcasting in Northern Ireland remain unresolved. These include issues at BBC Northern Ireland, the impact of the lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly, the rise of new television news providers, and new forms of Public Service Broadcasting.

Introduction

1. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in Northern Ireland (NI) remains at the centre of the public sphere, and at the centre of public life. The PSBs make a crucial contribution to news and journalism, the arts, and broader culture;
2. PSB services remain very popular within NI. Their services reach a very large proportion of the population on a weekly basis across television and radio, with local PSB content being particularly impactful;
3. Despite this, there are a few areas where the PSBs are not quite performing as well as might be expected;
4. In particular, spending and numbers of hours of ‘non-network first-run UK- originated content for Northern Ireland’ is not at the level it ought to be at;
5. The addition of a member for NI to the BBC Board was a major boost. Following the appointment of Michael Smyth in July 2023 (after an absence of many years), NI can once again gain representation in this key position;
6. A series of new challenges, many of which are not specific to NI, must also be taken account of when surveying the current state of PSB, in relation to new entrants into the media marketplace;
7. The purpose of this Research Monitoring Report is not to introduce new evidence into the debate, but rather to critically reflect on the evidence that Ofcom gathers through its UK-wide *Media Nations*¹ and NI-specific *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*² publications:
 - a. As such, this report offers interpretation of, and comment on, material that is already in the public domain. The report also draws in places on comparisons between this year’s data and data from previous years, and cites other relevant Ofcom policy documentation, alongside other policy documents, academic research, and news articles.
8. **Overall, PSB in NI is in a fairly healthy state, but there are various ways it could be strengthened, and issues remain that require further scrutiny.**

Reach and satisfaction for PSB in NI

9. The central PSB channels in NI (BBC One, BBC Two, UTV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 (ie. excluding the PSB group channels) have an audience share of 52.5% of overall broadcast television viewing in NI³ – as compared to the UK average of 53.5%;
10. The share of these channels in NI is on a par with the share of the channels in Wales, but marginally lower than the same channels in England and Scotland;⁴
11. Within this, NI viewing is dominated by BBC One and UTV, with BBC Two, Channel 4 and Channel 5 making up a much smaller proportion of the total (in keeping with the other nations):
 - a. UTV’s share of the total is higher in NI (19.2%) than ITV/STV/ITV Cymru Wales (averaging between 15.6% and 17.6%), while BBC One’s share is lower in NI than in the other nations⁵ – albeit, the margins of difference are quite small;
 - b. This reflects the long-standing appetite for UTV/ITV services in NI:

...usage and satisfaction rates remain very high, in an environment where PSB services are often written off by their critics as being irrelevant.

- i. UTV remains a crucial part of the PSB system in NI, an important point for consideration within the wider discussion around ITV's Public Service Obligations;
 12. Satisfaction rates for the PSB channels in NI remain good, with 69% of those who watch PSB on a regular basis stating they are 'very' or 'quite' satisfied⁶ – this is comparable to figures from the rest of the UK;
 13. Across the five channels, the figures are broadly comparable, though there is differentiation between the 'very' and 'quite' satisfied categories (eg. in NI, viewers are most satisfied with BBC One, and least satisfied with BBC Two – based on the 'very satisfied' rating)⁷:
 - a. Dissatisfaction rates are accordingly very low, though 9% of the NI audience are 'quite dissatisfied' with BBC Two⁸;
14. **Overall, usage and satisfaction rates remain very high, in an environment where PSB services are often written off by their critics as being irrelevant. This is particularly seen among certain sections of the press where a vitriolic anti-BBC agenda is pursued⁹.**

Video on Demand

15. The growth of Subscription Video-on-Demand (SVoD) now means that 68% of households in NI subscribe to at "least one"¹⁰ SVoD, a fall of 2% percentage points since the previous year;
16. Broadcaster Video-on-Demand (BVoD) services are being used extensively in NI, with the BBC iPlayer reaching 80% of people in NI (among those over the age of thirteen)¹¹ – compared to 73% in the previous year¹²:
 - a. The usage of the iPlayer in NI, "of online adults and teens" (ie. those who have the ability to access it), is eleven percentage points ahead of Netflix, compared to the one percentage point it was behind in the previous year (2021: BBC iPlayer 73%; Netflix 74%)¹³ (See Figure 1);
 - b. Comparing other SVoDs and BVoDs in order of popularity in NI, Amazon Prime Video is used by 56% of the population, with ITVX (what used to be called the ITV Hub) used by 52%;
 - c. The next PSB service, Channel 4 (what used to be called All4) is used by 46%, with Disney+ at 39% (see Figure 1);
 - d. The one outlier here is YouTube, which reaches 52% of people in NI. While like the BVoDs YouTube is a free service, it is obviously a very different service to the BVoDs that the PSBs operate;
17. Once again, the scale of the reach of the PSB BVoDs runs counter to the *Netflix narrative* – that following the rise of the global streaming platforms, the BBC and others will accordingly become obsolete:
 - a. For example, the *Daily Mail* reported that Conservative MPs argued that "increasingly 'woke' BBC should scrap the TV licence": "The broadcaster was urged to scrap the 'obsolete' fee amid accusations it does not offer 'value for money', with suggestions a subscription service like Netflix would be better."¹⁴

In the article, Brendan Clarke-Smith MP is cited, who “said the cost of the licence fee was ‘still a challenge for many’ and said he like to see a move to a ‘subscription-based model like Netflix’”. The article also quotes Mark Eastwood MP, who “added in the age of subscription services the TV Licence was becoming ‘ever more obsolete’”¹⁵;

- b. Curiously, not even Netflix itself advocates for the ending of the licence fee. In September 2020, Anne Mensah, who is Vice President of Original Series, Netflix, defended the role of the BBC when speaking to a Parliamentary committee – citing the role of the PSBs in creating talent for the overall UK industry, alongside the country’s theatre sector¹⁶;
18. Rather, the BVoDs are crucial and well-used services. In a cost-of-living crisis the fact that they are cost-free at the point of access means that they have an important social dimension¹⁷;
19. **The continual refrain that PSB is nearing obsolescence due to the rise of streaming platforms, and increased viewer choice, is simply not borne out in the data.**

Figure 1: SVoD and BVoD Usage in NI – 2023

SVoD or BVoD	Percentage Use ¹⁸
BBC iPlayer	80
Netflix	69
Amazon Prime Video	56
ITVX	52
Channel 4	46
Disney+	39
Sky on Demand or Sky Go	27
My5	26
Apple TV+	12

Source: Data derived from Ofcom (2023) *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*. London: Ofcom, p.16; p.18.

News and the Public Service Broadcasters

20. As the previous year’s Ofcom data show, “Trusted and accurate news is considered by audiences in Northern Ireland to be the most important attribute of PSB, followed by ‘programmes that help me understand what is going on in the world today’, and ‘a wide range of different types of programmes’”:¹⁹
- a. These attributes that are highly valued are very much in line with the standard and core values of PSB, both seen in the wider academic literature and the policy literature;
 - b. Each of these three points are clear characteristics of the ways in which PSB contributes to society. That is not to say that any/all of the three attributes can’t be found outside of the PSB framework in the UK, and yet it is PSB that most consistently delivers on them (eg. ‘Trusted and accurate news’) or

secures and guarantees their delivery (eg. 'Wide range of different types of programmes');

- c. However, when asked about the extent to which particular PSB attributes are delivered upon in NI, 'Programmes that feature my region/country' was ranked lowest at just 46%²⁰;
21. The importance of the BBC to news consumption in NI is clear from the 'Top ten sources of news in general in Northern Ireland: 2023': BBC Sources (BBC One, BBC website/app, BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, BBC iPlayer) take four of the top ten places in NI²¹. Out of the top twenty, it occupies 6 spots (the four above, with the addition of the BBC News Channel and BBC Radio 1)²²;
 22. UTV is the most used news source in NI – being used by 47% of all adults for general news in NI, compared to 44% for BBC One²³:
 - a. In the narrower category, of "news about Northern Ireland, for people in the nation", UTV was used by 41%, outstripping BBC One at 34%²⁴;
 23. While Facebook was the fourth most used source to access news in this category²⁵, it is always worth noting that using Facebook to access news involves clicking through to an existing news source, posted or reposted by users through the platform. Of these, Ofcom data show that across the UK the most followed news source on Facebook is the BBC²⁶;
 24. As has perennially be the case, radio factors very significantly as a source of news in NI vis-à-vis the other nations. In the 2022 data, among broadcasters (or "traditional media" as Ofcom term it), radio was used by 42% of the population *in* NI to access news *about* NI, compared to news about the other nations, in those nations: Scotland=33%; Wales=20%; England=18%²⁷:
 - a. Indeed, NI and Scotland were the only of the UK's nations in this category where radio outweighed social media, though the differential in NI (15 percentage points) is much greater than in Scotland (7 percentage points);
 25. **BBC News is under continual pressure from a range of critics, variously from corporate competitors, political opponents, and from sections of the public. However, that it remains so central to news consumption in NI is a salient reminder of its remaining social and cultural importance;**
 26. **UTV is fundamental to news consumption in NI. Policy attention and academic scrutiny should be redoubled in relation to the broadcaster.**

...that [BBC News] remains so central to news consumption in NI is a salient reminder of its remaining social and cultural importance.

Cool FM and BBC Radio Ulster

27. Radio in NI is something of an outlier compared to the rest of the UK, a phenomenon that has been the case for some years²⁸:
 - a. For example, commercial radio revenues on a per capita basis are substantially higher in NI than anywhere else in the UK (eg. £10.39 per capita in NI; £4.99 per capita in Wales);²⁹

- b. Moreover, the reach of local commercial and the reach of BBC nations/local radio are both substantially higher than elsewhere in the UK – this is at the expense of listening to BBC Network Radio (eg. BBC Radio 4), and national commercial stations, where both categories in NI are somewhat lower than in the other nations;³⁰
28. In the 2022 data, the leading commercial radio station Cool FM (18%) was ahead of BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle (16%) in terms of the ‘Top 20 sources of news in Northern Ireland’³¹:
- a. However, in the 2023 data, BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle (18%) is now three places ahead of Cool FM (14%) – though the Ofcom figures report the stations on broadcast listening alone, excluding online listening³²;
29. On Cool FM – and its position vis-à-vis BBC Radio Ulster, Ofcom in its 2022 *Media Nations: Northern Ireland* report noted that “the station with the greatest number of listeners each week is BBC Radio Ulster, which reaches over a third of the adult population”, with Ofcom noting in 2022 that *The Nolan Show* gets 337,000 listeners per week on average³³:
- a. Ofcom went on to note, “In Belfast, Cool FM is on a par with BBC Radio Ulster in terms of audience size, although BBC Radio Ulster performs better in market share, accounting for 20% of time spent listening to radio, compared to 13% for Cool FM”³⁴;
- b. The BBC’s position in radio vis-à-vis Cool FM is worth keeping under close scrutiny. The commercial station has really eaten into BBC Radio Ulster’s seemingly unassailable position in relation to its rivals just a few short years ago;
- c. In 2014, for example, Ofcom’s *Communications Market Report: Northern Ireland* didn’t even mention Cool FM; moreover, my 2016 article on Radio Ulster also didn’t mention Cool FM, as at that point it was so far out the scope of a discussion around news consumption and the public sphere³⁵. Instead, its rise has been prodigious, and it deserves more policy and academic scrutiny in relation to the reasons behind its success;

[Cool FM’s] rise has been prodigious, and it deserves more policy and academic scrutiny in relation to the reasons behind its success.

Spending on Public Service Broadcasting

30. Addressing PSB’s performance in terms first-run UK originations is an important issue, as it is a key area where PSB can distinguish itself from other non-PSB broadcasters. It can be argued to be an area that reveals the extent to which PSB providers are contributing on the characteristic that PSB be ‘original’³⁶;
31. In terms of spending, there was an 16% increase on “spend on first-run content for viewers in Northern Ireland”³⁷ as compared to the previous year:
- a. However, across the five years from 2017–2022 in the Ofcom data, there has been a fluctuation in spending in this category, as high as £32.9m in 2019, while 2020 was as low as £23.3m³⁸;
32. Both the BBC and ITV/UTV have increased their “spend on non-network first-run UK-originated content for Northern Ireland” since 2020: BBC: 2020 - £18.3m; 2022

- £24.1m; UTV: 2020 - £5.1m; 2022: £5.9m.³⁹ However, in both cases, spending in this category by both broadcasters was higher in 2019, pre-the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and indeed that position has not yet been recovered;
33. At the BBC, hours of “first-run UK-originated content for Northern Ireland” rose slightly by 19 hours between 2021 and 2022, while “news content makes up the largest amount of the BBC’s output for Northern Ireland, comprising 51% of first-run hours”⁴⁰;
34. Across the period 2016–2022, BBC first-run originations for NI audiences fell from 645⁴¹ hours to 573⁴², which represents an 11% fall:
- a. This is unfortunate, but quite clearly represents the extent to which the BBC has had to make reductions in line with the real-terms licence fee funding cuts implemented by the UK Government since 2010;
35. By contrast, hours of first-run originations at UTV for NI fell from 354 hours (2016)⁴³ to 345 hours (2022)⁴⁴, representing a fall of 2.5%;
36. In terms of NI-based productions among the PSBs for network consumption – in line with its very small share of the UK population – NI makes a tiny fraction of such content:
- a. However, the NI population makes up 2.8% of the wider UK population⁴⁵, and so the 1.5% of hours, and 2.1% of spending, as “Proportion of qualifying network hours and spend outside London, all PSBs combined”⁴⁶ means that NI is somewhat under-represented in the network spending among the PSBs;
 - b. Ofcom data show that the hours and spending for the BBC, Channel 4 and Channel 5 have all increased in the last year, while for ITV both categories have declined⁴⁷;
37. The Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland picked up the point that the NI population is underrepresented in network production in NI, in its submission to *Small Screen: Big Debate* it stated:
- a. “We believe that there is every reason at this stage to set more stretching targets for production spend in NI by the PSBs and develop the conditions in which these can be delivered”⁴⁸;
38. Moreover, we can question how ‘qualifying network production’ is defined – while accepting that the definition as currently fixed is being applied properly:
- a. Ofcom state regarding the BBC programme *Sunday Morning Live* that it “returned to Belfast in 2022 after two years of being managed in Manchester”⁴⁹;
 - b. However, while the programme is edited and produced from Belfast by Tern TV Belfast and Green Inc, it is “broadcast live from a London studio, using producers and directors in Glasgow, Manchester and Sheffield”⁵⁰;
 - c. Here, production companies are required to meet two out of three criteria set out in the *Regional production and regional programme definitions: Guidance for public service broadcasters*⁵¹ – for *Sunday Morning Live*, the programme meets criteria and is allocated to NI under ‘Substantive base region’ and ‘Off-screen talent region’⁵²;
 - d. As such, a production company can comply with these conditions, and the work be counted within the ‘qualifying network production in Northern Ireland’ figures, despite being physically broadcast from London;
- 39. The fact that spending by the BBC and UTV in the “non-network first-run UK-originated content for Northern Ireland” has not recovered to 2019 levels is concerning. In terms of hours, the 11% decrease over a six year period at the BBC is disappointing, while UTV’s decrease is much more marginal. NI**

audiences must continue to be served by strong levels of activity in both of these categories if PSB organisations are to serve their audiences well.

The Public Service Broadcasters and NI – prominence in reporting activities

40. Outside of the BBC, the extent to which NI features in the Annual Reports of the PSBs in NI is limited – this is particularly the case in relation to Channel 5:
 - a. For example, while Channel 5 has increased hours and spending on ‘qualifying network production in Northern Ireland’, there appears to be very limited information published by the broadcaster in relation to these activities;
 - b. Indeed, as one of only a few commercial PSBs, the level of information Channel 5 publishes in general is very limited compared to ITV and Channel 4;
 - c. The broadcaster refers to its activities around ‘Made Outside of London / Regional productions’ on its parent company Paramount’s corporate website⁵³, but there is nothing NI-specific provided⁵⁴;
41. In the case of Channel 4, more information is available around its NI activities:
 - a. For example, in June 2022 it announced a two-year partnership with screen support body, NI Screen⁵⁵, in order to “help forge stronger ties between Northern Ireland indies and Channel 4’s commissioners”. In addition, the partnership aims in part to “create more opportunities for NI talent to advance their careers in the television sectors; [and] ... have NI indies view Channel 4 as their key broadcast partner”;
 - i. This partnership led to, for example, two programmes commissioned in 2023: *Tiny Islands* and *The Country House Auction*;⁵⁶
 - b. Overall, of the £713m spent on content in 2022, £228m of this was spent in the ‘Nations and the English Regions’ (ie. outside London), while 66% “of hours of first-run originated programmes on the main channel [was] sourced from suppliers based in the Nations and Regions”;⁵⁷
 - c. In the “originated content” category of spending in Scotland, Wales and NI (£45m), £5m of this was spent in NI (up from £3.5m the previous year⁵⁸) – this equates to 11% of all spending in this category⁵⁹. However, NI makes up 18% of the UK’s population among the nations, and so NI is underrepresented in this category⁶⁰;
 - d. Moreover, “Northern Ireland” only merits nine mentions in the space of Channel 4’s 237-page Annual Report for 2022, seven of which relate to *Derry Girls*. As such, it pales into insignificance compared to the place NI is given in BBC documentation. More generally, it is of course important to recognise the hugely significant cultural impact that *Derry Girls* has had;
42. Indeed, this is an issue too with ITV: in its most recent Annual Report, references to UTV in the body of the report are to its acquisition of UTV and to the Company’s responsibilities in relation to the UTV pension scheme only⁶¹; the term “Northern Ireland” itself appears nowhere in the body of the report.
43. It is worthwhile noting here that some of the work of the PSBs goes towards supporting the wider independent television production sector. This can be seen in part through skills development, and offering training opportunities to those starting out. For example, Channel 4’s various training schemes have had a significant

impact across the UK.⁶² This point is somewhat outside of the scope of this report, but it offers some balance on the extent to which NI activities are reported by the PSBs;

44. **Outside of the BBC, there is very limited attention paid to Northern Ireland in the annual reports of the Public Service Broadcasters. While not a sole measurement of interest levels – and as noted they do spend significantly in NI – better reporting of NI activities would be welcome.**

Wider factors in relation to the Public Service Broadcasting ecosystem in NI

The addition of Michael Smyth ... to the BBC Board was a major step forward ... In governance terms, it is imperative that this role remains filled.

45. The addition of Michael Smyth as *Non-Executive Director – Member for Northern Ireland* to the BBC Board was a major step forward for PSB in NI. As this role had been left unfilled for many years (since 2017, and indeed, no one had ever filled the role on the newly formulated BBC Board), this left NI under-represented as a region within the BBC. In governance terms, it is imperative that this role remains filled:

a. If an NI Executive is functioning when his term ends in July 2027, and fails to appoint a successor, then this would once again lead to NI being under-represented in this area;

46. Away from its successes in maintaining its popularity among the audience, BBC Northern Ireland has endured a turbulent 2023. A series of highly publicised events, including a settlement paid to its news presenter Donna Traynor following an employment tribunal⁶³, has meant that the news headlines around the Corporation in NI have more often than not been negative. That is not to

say of course that the reporting of local media is not flavoured by the fact that most of it comes from commercial rivals of BBC Northern Ireland. However, such reporting and such a focus on the Corporation itself may be damaging to PSB in the region;

47. Much of the attention is focused on Stephen Nolan, in relation to *The Nolan Show* (on radio), and to a lesser extent *Nolan Live* (on television). Nolan's role in BBC Northern Ireland and in the wider public sphere is debated in a highly charged and politicised environment. Questions have centred on a range of issues, including on who has access to the airwaves and the prominence they are given, and editorial balance;
48. At the time of writing, too many questions remain open to offer a full assessment of the potential implications of some of the matters that have come up through 2023. However, some general observations can be made on the events of the year so far:
- a. As we know from many decades of the BBC generating a very heated reaction in NI – primarily from its contested role during the Troubles⁶⁴ – the Corporation will never have an *understated* role to play within politics and society in NI: indeed, from the figures outlined above, the audience do not want it to, or rather if they did they would switch off in much greater numbers;

- b. The vast majority of the criticisms that are aimed at BBC Northern Ireland relate to a very small section of its news and current affairs output, while there is some contestation around how particular issues are reported. The significant majority of BBC Northern Ireland's output passes with very little criticism (beyond the low-level criticisms that all broadcasters continually receive):
 - i. There are a few exceptions to this: for example, there was the fallout from the cuts at BBC Radio Foyle, which generated a very significant amount of opposition locally⁶⁵, and has even been debated nationally;
 - ii. Moreover, following the events of October 2023 in Israel and Gaza, protestors supporting Palestine demonstrated outside BBC Northern Ireland's Headquarters, in criticism of the Corporation's reporting on the conflict⁶⁶;
- c. However, in terms of the overwhelming majority of BBC Northern Ireland's ongoing output, there is no great clamour for it to be greatly reduced, or even abolished. There are no protests calling for Hugo Duncan to be removed from BBC Radio Ulster; and there is no groundswell of opposition to *Barra's Return of the Wild* returning for a second series. As we see from the BBC Radio Foyle case, people on the whole want *more*, not *less* of the BBC in NI;
- d. The BBC's detractors rarely offer a vision of what the public sphere would be like with the absence of BBC Northern Ireland's more controversial programmes. If say, BBC Northern Ireland abandoned its current affairs-based phone-in programmes, it is perhaps inarguable that while a public sphere may remain that is closer to their personal preferences it would nevertheless be a *reduced* public sphere.
 - i. This is, at the most basic level, based on the fact that it would first and foremost have less news and information circulating within it. There is no reasonable prospect that commercially funded news broadcasters would replace anything like the same level of news and current affairs content within NI, currently broadcast by BBC Northern Ireland, in the way London-based commercial broadcasters have elsewhere in the UK;
- e. Nevertheless, the BBC never fares well when the Corporation itself becomes the story. Instead, the audience should expect that the Corporation – while never shying away journalistically from controversial areas – be governed in a way which allows it to keep the subjects of their stories as the main journalistic interest, rather than the Corporation itself;

49. The lack of a functioning Executive, and the fact that the NI Assembly is currently not sitting, mean that local opportunities are being missed for government or the legislature to feed into various aspects of the broadcasting regulatory and oversight process:

- a. For example, an MOU from 2015⁶⁷ gives the NI Executive and NI Assembly a part to play in BBC Charter renewal⁶⁸. But without these institutions functioning, they will not be able to play that role in the next Charter Renewal period;
- b. More generally, when the NI Assembly was running, politicians questioned BBC Executives in committee formats. For example, the then Director of BBC Northern Ireland, Peter Johnston, was questioned by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in 2013⁶⁹;

- c. While the NI Assembly’s All Party Groups are still running (with one on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability), these stop short of playing the role that Stormont ought to be in this area. Indeed, there is a current lack of full democratic scrutiny in relation to broadcasting, not to mention all other areas;
50. The Rise of *GB News* Should be taken account of within this discussion. While it is not a PSB – and clearly will never aspire to be one – its impact on NI is worth taking account of, especially in relation to its impact on news and journalism:
- a. As such, as *GB News* (and to a lesser extent, *TalkTV*) begins to shape viewer and listener expectations of what broadcast news and current affairs *can* and *should* do. It may therefore begin to have a knock-on impact on to viewer and listener expectations for BBC Northern Ireland, and UTV, for example;
 - b. *GB News* appears to take a special interest in Northern Ireland affairs, in relation to Brexit, the NI Protocol and the latter Windsor framework, not to mention its role for Baroness Arlene Foster as one of its presenters. Indeed, the company maintains an NI-specific URL for NI News⁷⁰;
 - c. It makes much of its live coverage of the annual Orange Order-Twelfth of July celebrations, following BBC Northern Ireland’s live television retreat from this space;
51. While not under Ofcom’s remit in relation to PSB (though all channels broadcast in the UK are subject to Ofcom’s *Broadcasting Code*), it is nevertheless appropriate to include various ‘new expressions of PSB’ within such a discussion:
- a. While these are less prevalent with in the case of NI, podcasts like Global Radio’s *The News Agents*⁷¹ pursue what is essentially a public service broadcasting agenda. While there are some differences to this, including the fact that the presenters (Emily Maitlis, Jon Sopel and Lewis Goodall) include their own views prominently within the programming, the format is still deeply grounded in a BBC-style framework – the organisation all three presenters moved from;
 - b. Within the context of NI, a consideration of similar forms of PSB-style content should take place, allowing for account to be taken of podcasts, blogs, and other forms of online expression, that attempt to hold to the values of PSB;
52. A Media Bill was first announced by the Government back in May 2022, in order to update the current broadcasting legislation that has been in place for many years. At that point, the privatisation of Channel 4 was placed on the table, but in January 2023 this was ruled out by the Government:
- a. A Draft Media Bill was then set out in March 2023, which, among other things is intended to “make sure public service broadcast content is always carried and easy to find for UK audiences on connected devices and major online platforms, including on Smart TVs, set-top boxes and streaming sticks, so audiences can easily access this content in the way that best suits them”⁷²;

...a consideration of similar forms of PSB-style content should take place, allowing for account to be taken of [media] ... that attempt to hold to the values of PSB.

- b. It remains to be seen whether this Bill will be taken forward, and whether there will be time for it to pass into legislation within the remainder of this Parliament. Nevertheless, regardless of whether is passed by this Government, or if a future Government takes forward something similar, the legislative context for PSB may be changing in the near term;

53. A policy lacuna exists on the prospect of how PSB would be constituted following a potential referendum leading to Irish (re)unification – at least in the public domain:

- a. Given the possibility that a referendum on Irish (re)unification will take in the medium to long-term, even if the outcome was that NI remains part of the UK, it would be worthwhile for policy options to be set out;
- b. In particular, policy makers, academics and relevant third sector organisations in both NI and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) should be considering what the options for PSB would be in a potentially (re)unified Ireland;
- c. While the Good Friday Agreement, the following *Joint Declaration* and subsequent collaborative working between the UK and ROI have ensured that the broadcast services from TG4 and RTÉ remain accessible in NI,⁷³ BVoD services can differ:
 - i. While most programmes on the RTÉ Player are accessible in NI, rights issues mean that some may not be. RTÉ advises that “some RTÉ programming is restricted to the Republic of Ireland or Island of Ireland for rights or legal reasons”⁷⁴. Back in 2016, the broadcaster suggested that due to Internet Service Providers incorrectly locating a house outside of the island of Ireland, some users may be inadvertently locked out of accessing programming⁷⁵;

54. A number of issues that are pertinent to a discussion of Public Service Broadcasting in NI remain unresolved. These include issues at BBC Northern Ireland, the impact of the lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly, and the rise of new television news providers and new forms of Public Service Broadcasting. These issues should be placed under renewed policy, political and academic attention, especially where they relate to the future of PSB.

Notes

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https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/265377/ni-report-2023.pdf [Accessed: 30/08/2023].

³ *Ibid.*, p.13

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Eg. Falvery, D. (2021) ‘BBC licence fee: Broadcaster under pressure over levy rise – major review’, *Daily Express*, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1540379/bbc-licence-fee-cost-2020-freeze-drop-royal-charter-review-latest-defund-the-bbc> [Accessed: 30/08/2023]; Eg. Hoffman, N. (2023) ‘Beeb Under Scrutiny: BBC faces formal review over ‘unsustainable’ licence fee model with ministers poised to intervene’, *The Sun*, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tv/tv-news/23088974/bbc-faces-formal-review-over-licence-fee/> [Accessed: 30/08/2023], where the licence fee is called a “controversial fee”.

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- ¹⁰ Ofcom (2023) *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*. London: Ofcom.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/265377/ni-report-2023.pdf [Accessed: 30/08/2023], p.16
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.18
- ¹² Ofcom (2022) *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*. London: Ofcom.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/242702/ni-report-2022.pdf [Accessed: 30/08/2023], p.8
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Revoir, P. And Gordon, A. (2021) 'TV licence could be scrapped for Netflix-style subscription when all viewers have access to superfast broadband, media minister says', *Daily Mail*,
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9315787/TV-licence-scrapped-Netflix-style-subscription.html> [Accessed: 30/08/2023].
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Anne Mensah argued: "Creatively, I think you can't extract one part of the creative industry in the UK from another. As much as we work with talent that flows through the PSBs, we also work with talent that flows through theatre. [...] You can't separate one thing from another. We all have to work together for the best of the UK industry."¹⁶ Speaking to the same committee, Benjamin King, Director of Public Policy, UK and Ireland, Netflix, said "The impact that the BBC has had over the last few decades in building the profile of the UK creatively, in nurturing talent, its investment in production and so forth, is one of the key reasons why we have chosen to make our home here and one of the reasons why we are such strong supporters of what it does and want to see it continue doing." House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2020) Oral evidence: The future of public service broadcasting, HC 156.
<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/854/pdf/> [Accessed: 30/08/2023].
- ¹⁷ Columnist Suzanne Moore writes, "In a multi-subscription world of Netflix, Now TV, YouTube, a fee which was introduced in 1946 when the BBC was the only broadcaster no longer makes sense. The mission of the BBC to act in the public interest and to provide 'impartial, high-quality and distinctive content' according to the Royal Charter is also an outmoded concept." Moore, S. (2023) 'I long defended the BBC, but I can't justify the licence fee anymore', *Daily Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/columnists/2023/06/27/bbc-tv-license-refuse-to-pay/> [Accessed: 30/08/2023].
- ¹⁸ "Ofcom VoD Survey 2023. Online adults/teens aged 13+, Northern Ireland. Question: Q1a. Can you tell us which of the following services you have personally used to watch programmes, films or other video content in the past 3 months?"
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https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/242702/ni-report-2022.pdf, p.27
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.28
- ²¹ Ofcom (2023) *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*. London: Ofcom.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/265377/ni-report-2023.pdf, p.19
- ²² Ofcom (2023) News Consumption Survey 2023: Northern Ireland. London: Ofcom.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/264653/news-consumption-2023-northern-ireland.pdf, p.4
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https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/265377/ni-report-2023.pdf, p.19
- ³³ Ofcom (2022) *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*. London: Ofcom.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/242702/ni-report-2022.pdf, p.42
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.42
- ³⁵ Ramsey, P. (2016). BBC Radio Ulster: Public Service Radio in Northern Ireland's divided society. *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, 23(1), 144–163. (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2016.1155027>).
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- ³⁹ Ibid., p.23
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p.24
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- ⁴² Ofcom (2023) *Media Nations: Northern Ireland*. London: Ofcom.
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FEEDBACK

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Responses can be emailed to pt.ramsey@ulster.ac.uk

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