"Working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting"

Voice of the Listener & Viewer

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RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS FROM THE HOUSE OF LORDSSELECT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS -THE BRITISH FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRIES

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British Broadcasting system. We have limited our response to broadcasting matters as we have no specialist knowledge or insights into the UK film industry.

1. What do the UK film and television industries currently contribute to the UK economy and British culture? In what ways might this contribution be enhanced?

VLV believes that the UK film and television industries make a major contribution to the British economy, culture and wider society. In particular, despite the preponderance of US films and television programming, research indicates that audiences most enjoy seeing fiction and non-fiction that relates to their own societies. The role of the UK Film and TV industry in helping 21st century Britons understand, and value, their own society and culture is enormous. A society that does not reflect on its own experiences is an impoverished one – thanks to the UK film and TV industry that is not the case here.

There is evidently a growing problem as regards investment in children's television – particularly outside the BBC. Investment in original UK children's programmes fell by 17% since 2001, even though at the same time total investment in UK programmes rose by 4%, according to Ofcom's Future of Children's Television Programming report (2007, p.47). In consequence, for child audiences, the offer largely comprises imports and repeats: across all the material broadcast to children in 2006, strikingly only 1% was UK-originated first run material. It could hardly get any less (Ofcom 2007, p.30).

These trends threaten to meet neither children's own priorities nor their developmental needs. Already, children's viewing is disproportionately greater for UK-originated programming and disproportionately less for imports (Ofcom, p. 97). Moreover, much that is imported for children is animation, so that cartoons account of 61% of programmes for children; yet they account for only 41% of their viewing. Children prefer to watch drama and factual programming, exactly the two genres most under threat. Ofcom (p.73), reports that drama accounts of 12% of output but 19% of viewing, while factual is 5% of output but 7% of viewing. Further, 19 of the top 20 (i.e. most viewed) children's programmes in 2006 were BBC1 (p.102).

So, children vote with their EPG's for diversity in genres, especially those whose funding is most threatened (drama and factual) and they want UK programming, as indeed do their parents (p.115). But the market does not deliver according to their preferences: for although targeted by marketers and advertisers more than any child generation in history, children are insufficiently profitable by comparison with adults.

VLV believes that children need and deserve programmes which reflect their own rich and diverse heritage of language, literature, values and environment, as well as those of other countries and cultures. Viewing high quality UK-originated programming affirms children's identities and sense of their place in the world and it stimulates their imagination and play. Research suggests that children's response to television can be more subtle and complex when the young people portrayed and the dilemmas they face closely resemble themselves. This is not just a matter that affects children. Children grow up. The quality of the programmes they watch as they grow will affect the quality of our society when they form the adult population.

2. How do the current UK arrangements for distribution and exhibition of films affect the commercial success of the film industry? How might long run changes in international film production and distribution affect the UK film industry and its export potential over the next decade? To what extent is the raising of finance an inhibiting factor in UK film projects?

This is not an area that VLV makes claims to any specialist knowledge or insight.

3. Have the 2006 changes to the tax credit system been of benefit to the UK film industry? Have they had a perceptible effect on UK film production? Are the qualifying conditions, including the "Britishness" test, for the tax credit appropriate? Are any types of film or types of commercial arrangement unreasonably excluded?

This is not an area that VLV makes claims to any specialist knowledge or insight.

4. Is the UK Film Council meeting its objectives of giving support to production and export of British films? Could it do more to assist the UK film industry's contribution to the UK economy?

This is not an area that VLV makes claims to any specialist knowledge or insight.

5. Is the current business infrastructure in the UK conducive to the acquisition of the managerial and technical skills required by the film and television industries? Is the business environment conducive to the emergence of entrepreneurial talent, which can take advantage of opportunities in the creative industries?

This is not an area that VLV makes claims to any specialist knowledge or insight.

6. How successful has the regulatory system been in supporting UK content in television? Are there particular types of programming, such as drama, children's or factual programming, for which more support is needed? Could more be done through regulation or incentives, for example, to encourage nonpublic service broadcasters to commission original UK content? Might financial measures, such as industry levies, be feasible and effective?

Up until relatively recently the regulatory structure for British broadcasting has indeed provided a climate that has encouraged the production and distribution of high quality UK content. However, the 'light touch' of Ofcom has given rise to some changes for the worse in UK content. Most worryingly has been the withdrawal from providing children's programming that Ofcom has allowed ITV to undertake over the past few years and their most recent moves to cease providing local news. VLV believes that the licence fee has been an effective means of guaranteeing both the quality of UK programming on television and the continued existence of PSB pluralism – now threatened by the retreat of ITV from most of its PSB commitments and the possibility of Channel Four being forced into a merger with RTL (owners of 5). VLV believes that there is scope for industry levies as a means of boosting the funding available to PSB broadcasters which has not been sufficiently explored. We would argue that ensuring that the commercial organisations that benefit from the output of the PSB broadcasters should pay something towards maintaining the viability of these broadcasters seems wholly equitable.

7. How will the structural changes facing the UK television industry, and particularly the public service broadcasting component, affect UK originated television content? To what extent are these effects irreversible? To what extent are they being offset by changes elsewhere in the creative industries sector? What are the implications for television content creation of digital switchover and widespread broadband availability?

VLV shares with the House of Lords Communications Committee's view, as expressed in the recent Report into Public Service Broadcasting that "…. there is a continuing need for public service alternatives to the BBC." We are concerned that legislative and regulatory changes that will follow publication of the 'Digital Britain' report will make the continued existence of PSB programming outside the BBC difficult if not impossible, especially in view of a possible Channel Four/Five tie-up.

Some Comments that do not fall neatly into the formal questions above

Top Slicing

VLV has not supported top-slicing of the BBC licence fee to fund commercial broadcasters. The licence fee is a simple mechanism to fund the provision of public service broadcasting by the BBC, free at point of use and without of advertising. Most consumers and citizens support this method of funding. At present it is already being "top-sliced" to fund the Digital Switchover Help Scheme. In early 2008 the Audit Commission hinted that some of the £600 million might not be needed. From that moment there were requests from all parts of the communications industry for a slice of the money to fund pet projects. Few of these projects involved the provision of public service broadcasting. VLV is concerned that if top-slicing continues there will no longer be clarity in the use of the money which will lead to confusion among consumers and a fall in support for the licence fee.

However we await the final Digital Britain Report and will revisit this subject when it is published. The survival and financing of public service broadcasting with good, UK produced content from a number of providers is our objective.

New Technology

We are cautious about consigning "old" technology to the past. Each new communications technology has been perceived as the death knell for one or more of the old technologies. Respected commentators saw television as putting an end to cinemas as the vehicle for watching films. This has not happened. Film did not end live performances in theatres. Radio, a technology from the early decades of the last century, still thrives among the competing technologies of the 21st century. The restructuring of the UK television industry that may be necessary will not change the basic technologies. It will not alter the desire of the citizen and consumer to access UK produced, high quality programmes in the most economical and user-friendly way possible. Most TV “water cooler” moments are still provided by programmes on the major free-to-view terrestrial channels.

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