



Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Championing Excellence and Diversity in Broadcasting

Summer 2021

Bulletin 131

UK BROADCASTING TO BE OVERHAULED



The government is preparing to publish a Media White Paper in the late autumn which will set out wholesale reform of the UK's broadcasting system, currently governed by the 2003 Communications Act.

It will draw on advice from Ofcom's PSB Review, the government's Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) Advisory Panel and two consultations—one on the privatisation of Channel 4 and the other, yet to be published, on regulation of on-demand platforms. It's understood that the resulting Media Bill will include legislation to promote public service content on streaming platforms, a measure the public service broadcasters and Ofcom have long called for.

The work of the PSB Advisory Panel is being held behind closed doors, so VLV can share no details of its input, but we are concerned by some of the recommendations made by Ofcom following its PSB Review. Ofcom is proposing that a more relaxed approach should be taken to the regulation of public service content, with a reduction in hard-edged quotas and a more qualitative approach to assess PSB performance. It is also proposing that other entities could receive benefits, such as funding, if they provide PSB content but without having to make any long term commitment to PSB. This could undermine the existing PSB institutions and fragment the delivery of PSB content.

Alongside the PSB Review, which solely focused on television, a Radio Review has been running for 18 months and is due to publish its recommendations in the autumn. The joint government/industry team has been considering how radio should adapt to the growing challenges and opportunities from new technologies such as streaming and online audio. They say it will make recommendations which aim to strengthen UK radio and audio for the benefit of listeners.

VLV will be keeping a close eye on all these policy developments and making submissions to relevant consultations to represent the interests of audiences. We will cover these issues at our planned **Autumn Conference on Wednesday November 24th.**

SHOULD CHANNEL 4 BE PRIVATISED?



A DCMS consultation is running until September 14th on whether to privatise Channel 4, the UK's only publicly-owned commercial public service broadcaster. VLV encourages all its members and anyone with an interest in public service broadcasting (PSB) to respond to the consultation on the **DCMS website**. A VLV **briefing** is available from the VLV office and website.

The DCMS last considered privatising Channel 4 five years ago and decided against it, largely because the sale wouldn't raise significant funds and the government at that time wished to retain the C4 public service remit and support the UK's independent production sector which is heavily dependent on C4. As part of the deal, the government tasked C4 with moving its headquarters out of London and increasing its commissioning across the UK. Channel 4's new HQ is now in Leeds and this has already led to economic growth and a flourishing creative hub in West Yorkshire.

The government's stated intention is to ensure the financial sustainability of Channel 4 but as yet little evidence has been provided that privatisation will benefit either Channel 4 or audiences.

Channel 4's model is unconventional. It doesn't produce content; instead it commissions it from independent production companies, providing jobs and UK culturally specific content. As a public company it doesn't provide a return to shareholders, instead putting its surplus back into the production of new content. Some may not think of Channel 4 as a traditional PSB with its provocative, alternative approach, but it often provides PSB content unlikely to appear anywhere else. It pioneered coverage of the Paralympics, it highlights social issues in drama and factual programmes and it provides one of the UK's most respected in-depth news bulletins every weekday. It attracts younger, more diverse audiences and its remit specifically requires it to be innovative and risk-taking.

Many in the industry and Channel 4 itself are questioning the government's motives in trying to force through privatisation. VLV will be responding to the DCMS consultation and we encourage you to do so as well. It is crucial that the interests of audiences are central in this debate.

*Championing Excellence and Diversity
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VLV represents citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and champions excellence and diversity in broadcasting. VLV is free from political, sectarian and commercial affiliations. VLV is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulation that underpin the British broadcasting system and in particular to maintain the principles of public service broadcasting.

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The Bulletin is edited by Sophie Chalk and published by the Voice of the Listener & Viewer Ltd, a charitable company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales No 4407712. Charity No: 1152136

Views expressed in the bulletin are those of contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the VLV.

ISSN 1475-2948

FROM THE CHAIRMAN, COLIN BROWNE



Welcome to this 'extra' Bulletin. We felt that with so many current initiatives and consultations relevant to the future of public service broadcasting, we should aim to make sure that our members and friends are fully up to speed.

A new development has been the government's announcement of a consultation on the future of Channel 4, making clear that its preferred option is to privatise the publicly-owned broadcaster. The Government says that it wishes to ensure the long-term financial viability of C4; but it is, at best, unclear how privatisation would achieve this. C4 has just reported a very successful year, both financially and artistically, and does not support the need for privatisation. The Government has declined to publish any evidence to support its proposal, nor produced an impact assessment. The concern is that to make C4 more financially attractive to a potential buyer, its unique remit will need to be significantly loosened to the detriment of UK viewers and the UK production sector. The Government is keen to provide reassurance that 'it's just a change of ownership, so don't worry'. But that is clearly not the case and it's important that anyone who opposes this move writes to their MP and responds to the consultation.

Enjoy the rest of Summer and do sign up to the events we have planned for the Autumn.

Colin Browne
Chairman of VLV

VLV RESEARCH: BBC FUNDING 2010-2021

VLV research shows that the BBC's real terms public funding for UK television, radio and online services has been cut by 25% since 2010 despite significant rises in the cost of providing content for audiences.

The government has raided the licence fee to fund a number of separate initiatives, leaving less to be spent on content for licence fee payers, which means that we are getting less value for money from the TV licence today than we did a decade ago. This research comes at a time when the BBC is in the process of negotiating its funding settlement from 2022-27. An announcement is due on this, likely to be made in the autumn. It's been suggested that if the BBC is to deliver Tim Davie's strategic plan the BBC will require an increase in funding of 2% and for the cost of the TV Licence to rise in line with inflation. A briefing note on the VLV research is available on the [VLV website](http://www.vlv.org.uk) or on request from the VLV office.

CHANNEL 5 NEWS CHANGES

Channel 5 has requested Ofcom to consider a change to its licence to allow it to put out a single hour-long early evening news bulletin at 5pm, rather than two existing half-hour bulletins at 5pm and 6.30pm. VLV made a **submission** to Ofcom, considering the impact this change would have on audiences and their choice of news programmes. We concluded that the proposal would benefit audiences because it will improve the range and choice of PSB news programmes available to audiences.

BBC THREE TV CHANNEL?

The BBC was hoping to return BBC Three as a broadcast channel early in 2022, but following a BBC public interest test and an Ofcom consultation, the regulator has decided to carry out a full competition assessment following concerns from Channel 4 and commercial broadcasters. It is likely to make a final decision in 6 months' time, just before the BBC originally planned to relaunch the channel.

JOCELYN HAY LECTURE 2021: CLAIRE ENDERS

Tuesday 12th October 2021

5.30pm-6.30pm

Online



We are delighted that VLV Patron and the founder of Enders Analysis, Claire Enders, will deliver the Jocelyn Hay Lecture 2021. Claire is a leading analyst of the creative and broadcast industries in the UK and her view of the challenges facing broadcasters and the potential solutions to support high quality UK broadcasting will be fascinating to hear at a time when the government is preparing its Media White Paper.

VLV established the Jocelyn Hay lecture series in 2012 in memory of our founder, with the aim of providing an opportunity for eminent speakers to consider the importance of quality broadcasting, and particularly public service broadcasting, for citizens in the UK.

To attend the lecture please [book online](#) or call 01474 338716.

BBC OLYMPICS COVERAGE

Audiences have been disappointed that this summer's Olympics coverage was significantly reduced when compared with that in 2016. This change was due to a TV rights deal the IOC signed with the US broadcaster Discovery, which bought the European rights for the games for £920m, putting its output on pay subscription channels. The deal only allowed the BBC to broadcast 2 live streams of the event, reduced from the 24 live streams it ran in 2016. As a result viewers missed many key moments when Team GB won medals. The current IOC deal with Discovery runs until after Paris 2024.

The Olympics is a listed event, which means by law there has to be some free-to-air coverage, but this deal has shown how the needs of audiences are secondary when commercial deals are struck with sporting bodies, even when an event is designated as 'listed'. Damian Collins MP, former chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport select committee, has accused the IOC of putting "short-term profit ahead of the long-term health of the Olympic movement".

VLV CITIZENS' FORUM

We live in a world where there has been an explosion of competing, often inaccurate and untrusted news and information. Our public service broadcasters provide a rock of reality on which people can depend. As such, they provide a vital resource for us all.

Lord Smith of Finsbury (May 26, 2021)

VLV has been awarded a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) to amplify the voices of citizens from across the UK so they are better represented in the debate about public service broadcasting. The project will run until 2023.

This work is timely as the government prepares to reform the 2003 Communications Act which could include privatisation of Channel 4, as detailed elsewhere in this bulletin. VLV believes that citizen interests should be at the heart of laws underpinning our broadcasting system, but citizens are generally less able to engage in consultation processes than industry which has the resources, contacts and expertise to influence government decisions. This creates a significant imbalance in representation in the debate.

Please do get in touch if you want to find out more about the Citizens' Forum by emailing info@vlv.org.uk

BBC OUTPUT HIT BY PINGDEMIC

The BBC has been forced to stop making some of its local TV news programmes and local BBC Radio in England has been sharing more programmes between stations because of staff shortages blamed on the coronavirus self-isolation "pingdemic".

Although the immediate cause of the staffing crisis is the level of self-isolation alerts coming from the NHS Covid-19 app, the situation has highlighted the impact of deep cuts to staffing levels at the broadcaster over the last 10 years due to a reduction in its public funding.

A BUMPY START FOR GB NEWS

The GB News TV channel launched on June 13th with more than 250,000 viewers but it is now searching for a new Director of Programming after the resignation of news veteran John McAndrew. Audience data shows average viewing dropped significantly after the channel's launch from an average of 42,529 to just under 15,000 but the decision to hand Nigel Farage a nightly 7pm show appears to have given the station some reprieve, with unverified reports that viewing figures for his programme have surpassed those of the BBC News Channel and Sky News.

Diary Dates

VLV 38th Autumn Conference

Wednesday 24th November 2021

Venue to be decided

[Book Here](#)

VLV AGM 2021

Thursday 2nd December 2021

10.30am – 11.30am online

[Book here](#)



VLV SPRING CONFERENCE 2021

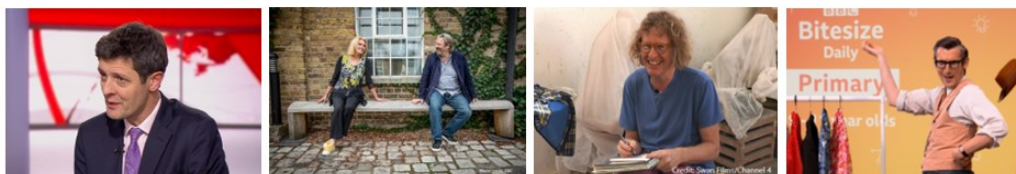
Due to Covid restrictions VLV held its Spring Conference 2021 online on the morning of April 29th. We were delighted to hear from industry leaders, all of whom reflected on the success of UK broadcasting as well as the challenges it faces in a global marketplace.

The first session focused on Channel 4 and was chaired by Lord Michael Grade, a member of the government's PSB advisory panel and former CEO of Channel 4. Alex Mahon, the CEO of Channel 4, explained how challenging the past year had been, with advertising income much lower than usual, but also said there were high points, such as the success of C4's 2020 drama *It's a Sin*.

The second session was with Lord Terry Burns, former Chair of Ofcom, chaired by Dame Colette Bowe, former VLV President and former Chair of Ofcom. Lord Burns reflected on his 20 years working in broadcasting policy – from the 2005 BBC Charter Review, the explosion of digital TV channels, to the challenge of maintaining the prominence of public service broadcasting in a world of online streaming.

The third session debated whether UK impartiality regulation is fit for purpose. VLV Patron Mark Damazer CBE chaired this session and was joined by five experts: Rachel Corp, Editor of ITV News, Professor Stephen Cushion of Cardiff University, broadcaster Julia Hartley Brewer, Lord Tom McNally and Stewart Purvis CBE, former Editor in Chief of ITN and Ofcom Partner for Content and Standards. All agreed that accuracy in news is crucial to maintain audience trust and they hoped that we will avoid following the American route where news channels are not required to be impartial. You can read more about all the conference sessions on the [VLV website](#).

VLV AWARDS 2020



Due to the pandemic we were sadly unable to present the VLV awards, now in their 29th year, in person. In place of a ceremony we published the winners online. They featured an array of high quality, excellent programming voted for by VLV members.

Public service broadcasting rose admirably to the challenge of helping us get through an incredibly difficult year in 2020 and this was reflected in the winners. They included BBC News' Health Editor, Hugh Pym, and Radio 4's Tim Harford, both of whom helped us better understand the pandemic. The Naomi Sargent award went to Grayson Perry for, among other things, his work inspiring and encouraging thousands of people to take up art. This year the VLV also made an award for the best lockdown broadcasting initiative. This went to the BBC's Lockdown Learning Project which provided educational material and programmes during 2020. A full list of the winners can be found on the [VLV website](#) or on request from the VLV office.

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