

BHA RESPONSE TO OFCOM CONSULTATION FOR ITS THIRD PSB REVIEW

Given the resources available, to what extent is the system meeting the needs of as wide a range of audiences as practicable?

We wish to make two points only in response to this review. They relate to your question 4 and both concern the obligation under the Communications Act for public service broadcasters to provide “programmes dealing with . . . religion and other beliefs ” that must include “(i) programmes providing news and other information about different religions and other beliefs; (ii) programmes about the history of different religions and other beliefs . . . ” (sn 264(6)(f)-(g).

Our first point concerns your review itself. Ofcom’s consultative paper refers almost exclusively to “religion”, without reference to “other (i.e. non-religious) beliefs”. In a score or so of references, we see only one exception to this pattern. This is contrary to the spirit of all human rights and equality law and appears to indicate a mindset in Ofcom that is unintentionally discriminatory but indicative of an unwillingness to take seriously the plain intentions of Parliament in adopting the quoted provisions.

Our second point concerns the obduracy of the PSB broadcasters in continuing to ignore the same provisions. This is particularly marked in the case of the BBC, which of course provides the bulk of broadcasting of this nature (168 hours out of a total of 229 by all PSB television broadcasters in 2012¹ quite apart from its extensive religious broadcasting on radio).

The result is that non-religious people, who now make up at least a quarter of the population² but more realistically about half³, are seriously underserved. We are most concerned with radio broadcasting, which is more suited to dealing with abstract ideas than television and is also of course far cheaper, but the same points apply also to television.

The BBC provides extensive programmes for Christians, by Christians, about Christianity. These amount on Radio 3 and 4 alone to over three hours a week - the Daily Service, Choral Evensong, Prayer for the Day and so on - with far more at the major religious festivals. Yet there is never a single programme about Humanism, the major alternative to religious belief, despite its ethical system standing in a tradition that is older than all the world religions (the last time there was any such programme was in 1965)!

The British Humanist Association articulates views shared by over a third of the British population⁴. It commands widespread respect, plays a significant role in matters of public ethics⁵ and education about religion and belief⁶, is represented on government consultative bodies such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Advisory Group on Freedom of

¹ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2013/output_and_spend.pdf. The average viewer watched 2.5 hours in the year - <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2013/viewing.pdf>.

² 2011 Census

³ British Social Attitudes - www.britisocat.com

⁴ See MORI poll at <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/190/Humanist-Beliefs.aspx>

⁵ For example, the BHA was represented in the Supreme Court proceedings on assisted dying in December 2013.

⁶ It is a founder member of the Religious Education Council and has representatives on the majority of local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education.

Religion or Belief⁷, is engaged with both the NHS and the Prison service in providing pastoral care that corresponds to chaplaincy, and has a membership base of over thirty thousand.

Yet the BBC not only fails ever to provide any programmes at all that examine - let alone articulate - humanist beliefs as a coherent alternative to religion but even refuses to allow humanists to contribute to its *Thought for the Day* slot where religions represented by tiny minorities of the population are regularly given air time. The absence of programmes about the beliefs of such a significant number of people may well contribute to the clear public dissatisfaction with 'challenging' and 'engaging' programming designed 'to make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints' referred to in your consultation paper.⁸

Moreover, when questioned about their failure the BBC adds insult to injury by flippant replies such as that from their Head of Religion and Ethics, Aaqil Ahmed:

He also rejected the idea of programming for Atheists, arguing that many Christian-based BBC shows were appropriate for secular audiences. "I don't think you have to be a Christian to enjoy Carols from Kings," he said, referring to the annual Christmas concert which the BBC has broadcast on radio or television for 86 years.⁹

This failure is unarguably inconsistent with their duty under the Communications Act as quoted above. It therefore falls to Ofcom in its regulatory role at least to draw attention to this failure and call on the BBC to reconsider its policy.

We call on Ofcom to do so.

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⁷ It is worth noting that the FCO provided substantial funding to allow large numbers of delegates from "countries of concern" to attend the World Humanist Congress organised by the BHA in Oxford in August 2014.

⁸ "Purpose 4: Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints - To make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints, through programmes that reflect the lives of other people and other communities, both within the UK and elsewhere

"3.75 The lowest rating for delivery was for 'it shows programmes with new ideas and different approaches' (47%).

"3.76 The largest gaps between the scores for importance and delivery of purposes and characteristics related to the most 'challenging' and 'engaging' elements: 'it shows programmes I want to watch' (79% importance vs. 56% delivery), 'it shows programmes that make me stop and think' (74% importance compared to 49% for delivery) and 'it shows programmes with new ideas and different approaches' (73% compared to 47%)."

- see <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/psb-review-3/summary/PSBR-3.pdf>

⁹ The Independent 26/12/14 - <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/tv-radio/bbcs-head-of-religion-aaqil-ahmed-calls-for-more-literacy-at-the-top-9945604.html>