



## Submission to the BBC Trust Review of Network Speech Radio

We welcome the opportunity for the Radio Independents Group (RIG) to respond to the BBC Trust's service review of network speech radio. RIG recently responded to the BBC Trust's review of the Corporation's music services and there is an extent to which some of our points, for example regarding BBC Radio budgets, relate to both consultations.

### The Independent Audio-Led Production Sector

As the Trust will be aware, audio-led independent producers provide a range of content on network speech radio stations, amounting to 15% on Radio 4 and 22% on Radio 5 live for example<sup>1</sup>. These are a mixture of quota and Window of Creative Competition (WoCC) commissions.

Whilst indies have done well in the Radio WOCC (winning 75% and 80% of commissions respectively in the first two years of operation), the WoCC only amounts to 10% of available BBC hours overall. Similarly the BBC radio indie quota is also set at 10%. So the opportunities available are still far below those in TV, where up to 50% of programmes can be made by indies.

Moreover independent production companies are responsible for many of the BBC's most distinctive programmes, including specialist drama, comedy and factual productions, with indie speech-based productions such as Campbell-Davison Media's *Danny Baker Show*, which has won several Radio Academy Awards, and companies such as Manchester-based Sparklab Productions have won or been nominated for awards. Indies also produce unique format shows such as *The Reunion*, made by Whistledown Productions.

Indies are also responsible for landmark speech-based events - as one example, in 2013 TBI Media conceived, developed and produced 5 live's *Energy Day*. This unique event saw the station powered by renewable energy for the day, including a studio being powered by cyclists. This provided the background to a series of discussions about different forms of energy and their relative merits as well as the extent to which coherent energy policy was being enacted by the government.

As independent production companies, RIG's members work with many organisations besides the BBC: commercial radio; large corporate companies; public organisations; and with radio networks in other countries. Thus they can bring this experience to bear on their work with the BBC, adding to a distinctive feel for networks such as Radio 4 or Radio 5 live.

We respect the boundaries of this current review, in that it does not intend to examine closely the issues around content supply, but in the current context of 'Compete or Compare' it is valid to say that greater competition for ideas would bring significant benefits to licence fee payers.

We will expand on these areas more fully in our submission to the Trust's current review of television, radio and online content supply.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Annual Report: Performance against public commitments 2013/14, p24

## **Radio 4**

Our members have raised some specific points relating to Radio 4 in particular.

### Short Story readings

The remit for Radio 4 includes readings. The subject matter for such readings has in the past included short stories. But despite being a form of dramatic writing which is well-suited to radio, there has been a decline in the commissioning of short story readings in recent years. Short stories are widely recognised as being a specific art form, one that is much appreciated by listeners, and it is to be regretted that the BBC does not appear to be supporting the genre to the same extent as it did previously, when short stories were a 15 minute segment of every weekday afternoon across the year. These were original commissions which provided a diverse range of fictional content for licence fee payers, as well as being a major boost to the UK's writers. We would therefore ask the Trust to make sure the BBC does not continue to neglect this form of storytelling.

### Original Content on Radio 4 Extra

Radio 4 Extra is, as part of its remit, expected to commission original content rarely found on Radio 4 – the extent to which this is done has been seriously reduced over the last 1-2 years and we would welcome the view of the Trust as to whether this trend should be reversed.

## **Representing Licence Fee Payers around the UK**

The issue of representing properly listeners around the UK has risen to the fore as a result of the Scottish referendum. RIG, as part of its arguments for how greater use of indies can improve the schedules, has made the point that its production companies are based in communities all around the UK, and therefore well-placed to provide a wide variety of stories, talent, ideas and perspectives.

Again acknowledging the fact that supply is not within this consultation, it is nevertheless legitimate to raise nations and regions representations in this above context and ask how the BBC, via whatever are the best means, can improve its track record in this respect.

In particular audience councils have noted that Radio 4 has an emphasis on the south-east, and not sufficiently attracting listeners from elsewhere in England. The BBC Trust Audience Council for England said in its 2012-13 review <sup>2</sup> that:

“Radio 4 is characterised by a sharp north/south divide with the south-east and south-west performing well above the UK average of 21 per cent of adults. However in the north and midlands there are far fewer listeners with only 11 per cent of adults in the Humberside region, 13 per cent in the north-east, and 15 per cent in Merseyside using the station. We are concerned that not enough is being done to ensure that the station appeals to listeners from all parts of England, and have raised this with the BBC Trust as an issue which needs urgent attention.”

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<sup>2</sup> England Annual Review 2012-13. BBC Trust Audience Council for England.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/who\\_we\\_are/audience\\_councils/england/annual\\_review/annual\\_review\\_2012\\_13](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/who_we_are/audience_councils/england/annual_review/annual_review_2012_13) accessed 6th February 2015.

The audience council also said that:

“While Radio 5 live has a much more even spread of listeners across England it still underperforms in some parts of the north and Yorkshire, despite now being based in Salford”.

We would be interested to know to what extent the Trust feels the BBC has subsequently acted to improve upon this performance.

It is important that the BBC continues with and grows initiatives such as the Radio 5 live northern “kicker fund”, which made between £50k-£60k available for indie commissions in the North West, but in future such funds should be extended to open up opportunities for further content from all around the UK.

There are already successful formats which could be applied to bring issues from different parts of the UK to national audiences, there could be a British version of a successful format such as ‘From Our Own Correspondent’ with a story or stories from different parts of the UK every week which shed a light on local cultural and social issues from different parts of the UK. Being made by a different production company around the UK would help emphasise the unique feel of the reports.

## **Budgets**

Relevant to all of the above is the ability for the BBC Radio to maintain the quality and overall range of its radio services.

To ensure the BBC is continuing to provide the best value for money, indie radio producers are also keen to share their expertise in producing high-quality distinctive content to a clearly-defined budget. RIG is currently engaging with the BBC Executive regarding its benchmarking exercise, in particular to stress the importance of transparency in taking full account of all of the BBC’s overheads. Having a clear understanding of its own costs will help the BBC be able to better determine where efficiencies can be gained without the need to simply cut or reduce services, which is clearly damaging to the experience of the licence fee payer.

Whilst we feel there is room for greater efficiency within BBC production, RIG is nonetheless concerned that recent cuts to BBC budgets threaten high quality and distinctive productions and services.

RIG’s members cite examples where rates charged for services provided by the BBC to independent producers have increased substantially (in one example, by 25%), while programme budgets remain frozen. This has a clear and immediate impact on programme-making.

It is of general concern that the BBC management does not at times seem to recognise the huge impact and reach its own radio services have, simply instead looking at its bottom line and prioritising it accordingly. Specifically, our opinion is that Delivering Quality First did not take sufficient note of the fact that with BBC Radio starting from the lower base in terms of budget, the effect of the cuts are disproportionately affecting radio budgets, including those for music services.

RIG challenges this approach - we would like to see the BBC Trust ensure that the BBC Executive is treating the BBC Radio budget on its own merits, rather than subjecting it to further uniformly-applied BBC cuts.

*Radio Independents Group, February 2015*