

## **Written evidence submitted by Public Service Broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4, and Channel 5)**

### **Public Bill Committee on the Online Safety Bill**

1. The BBC, Channel 4, and Channel 5 (Paramount) welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Public Bill Committee considering the Online Safety Bill. As public service broadcasters (PSBs) we play an essential cultural, economic, and social role in British life, supporting democratic values and delivering accurate news and high-quality content to millions across the UK and worldwide. All PSB content must meet high regulatory standards set by Ofcom, which is reflected in audience expectations that PSBs are trusted sources of content that is universally available.<sup>1</sup>
2. Methods of distributing our content are fast evolving. Today, around half of UK adults claim to use social media for news, and 25% use search engines.<sup>2</sup> Therefore as well as continuing to use traditional forms of broadcasting like TV and radio services to reach audiences, we deliver news and other content through third parties like social media platforms, as a way of engaging audiences with trusted information.
3. We welcome important provisions in the Bill to safeguard free expression, in particular duties for Category 1 services to protect journalistic content and content of democratic importance, including having expedited complaints procedures available relating to such content. We also welcome provisions that the government has committed to introducing, to ensure that journalistic content cannot be removed until a proper right of appeal has taken place.
4. However the Online Safety Bill should provide further targeted protections for PSB content. Just as news content is of vital importance to the nation, and already regulated, so is PSB content. Protections should reflect the high standards that PSB content meets under its regulatory obligations, and safeguard the availability of content from UK PSBs to all audiences, across a range of digital platforms.
5. To further futureproof the online safety regime and safeguard freedom of expression, the Bill should introduce duties for platforms to protect all PSB content (beyond the current exemptions for journalistic content and content of democratic importance), recognising its central role in the UK and under the expectation that it will not raise an issue under the specified areas of harm if it has already been complied for broadcast – i.e. this is material that is already

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom, 'Public Service Broadcasting: omnibus survey findings' (July 2020). Ofcom found that trusted and accurate news was considered to be the most valued benefit of PSB.

<sup>2</sup> Ofcom, 'News Consumption in the UK' (2021).

subject to robust regulation:

- **Importance of PSB content:** Beyond our news content, the UK's PSBs make a vital contribution to UK social and democratic life, by bringing people together through shared moments and experiences and portraying UK life, culture, and values on screen. In the words of Ofcom, in addition to 'helping to underpin the UK's wider creative economy ... the public service broadcasters produce a broad range of distinctive, high-quality TV programmes that speak to – and reflect – the diverse communities, regions and nations of the UK. They help to cohere our society, providing shared experiences of drama, entertainment and learning.'<sup>3</sup> From popular dramas like *All Creatures Great and Small* and acclaimed factual shows like *Davina McCall's Sex, Myths and the Menopause*, to weekly entertainment events like *Strictly Come Dancing* and live events like the Paralympic Games, PSBs regularly brings audiences together from across the nation. The pandemic illustrated the importance of PSB institutions at a time of crisis: for example, in the first week following the launch of BBC Lockdown Learning in 2021, there were nearly 6 million unique browser visits to Bitesize.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Preventing double regulation:** PSB content is already regulated to a very high standard by Ofcom. We adhere to the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and On Demand Programme Service Rules, which apply to all public service content, wherever and however it is received. This is reflected in the value audiences give to the role PSBs play in connecting communities, providing trusted news, and delivering entertainment. Ofcom research shows the top benefits of PSBs valued by UK adults include trusted and accurate UK news, bringing people together, high-quality productions, and a wide range of programming.<sup>5</sup>
6. The amendment the Government is planning to introduce, to ensure that journalistic content should not be removed, deprioritised, or user access to it restricted under the Bill until a proper right of appeal has taken place, should also extend to all PSB content.

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<sup>3</sup> Ofcom, 'The future of public service media' (2019).

<sup>4</sup> AT Internet (11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Ofcom, 'Public Service Broadcasting: omnibus survey findings' (July 2020).