

ITN Written Evidence to Public Bill Committee on the Media Bill

Introduction

1. Independent Television News (ITN) holds a unique place in the UK media landscape providing news services for millions of people daily by producing ITV News, ITV News London, Channel 4 News and 5 News as well as hundreds of hours of long-form factual programming for broadcasters and platforms through ITN Productions. It has over 67 years' experience in public service broadcasting and is renowned for being able to deliver journalism of the highest standard across all output and platforms.
2. As one of the UK's leading factual production companies which is intrinsically linked to the public service broadcast (PSB) ecology through our news output and the commissioning of our content by the public service broadcasters – ITN's interests in the Bill are clear. ITN is deeply concerned in ensuring that the outcomes of the Media Bill result in the sustainability of UK-originated content, and specifically news, continuing to be easily accessible to audiences despite changing viewing habits.

Overall view of the Media Bill

3. ITN welcomes the introduction of the Media Bill and its overall strategic direction to ensure that public service broadcasting retains its vital role and relevance in UK society. The pace of development in the media sector is rapid, and to preserve the cultural and economic benefits of public service broadcasting in the UK, swift and specific action is needed.
4. Our key clients: ITV, Channel 4, C5 (owned by Paramount) are all broadly supportive of the Media Bill, as are many others in the industry, and ITN supports the calls for the Media Bill to move swiftly through parliament.
5. ITN's view is shaped by its experience of proudly producing accurate and impartial broadcast, journalism, increasingly seen as video as required by Ofcom and believes that our commercial model is an example of the UK's successful public service broadcasting system.

The role of news in the PSB system

6. ITN firmly believes it is vital for audiences to have access to high quality, accurate and regulated journalism from a variety of independent sources, and that this is an essential component of a progressive democratic society. The value of news and its benefits to society appears to be recognised within the Bill as the PSB remit will continue to include public service content which explicitly includes news and current affairs.
7. There is a significant body of research indicating that viewers expect news to be offered as part of the eco-system, not least because news is strongly associated with the PSBs. UK broadcast news is the most trusted by audiences with ITN-produced services, ITV News and C4 News, often ranking as the most trusted broadcast outlets in the market¹. However, while ITN celebrates these findings, we are clear that there is no room for complacency. Our PSB clients recognise the challenges in making sure their distinctive brands are easily accessible to audiences, especially given access is now determined by powerful global platforms who act as 'gatekeepers' to content and this challenge extends to news programming, often described as the crown jewels of the PSB system.
8. The trust associated with PSB news has a direct benefit to the wider system. Speaking at a Westminster Media Forum event considering the Media Bill in April this year, analyst Alice Enders described the role of impartial UK broadcast news 'as anchoring society'. ITN believes that this characterisation of the genre is fundamental in understanding why news should be carefully considered as the Bill makes its passage through Parliament.
9. Our clients' remits inform our news services, which all cater for slightly different audiences, whether that's serving younger audiences for Channel 4, the mainstream service of ITV News, our regional offering ITV News London, or 5 News, popular in the nations and regions and with female viewers, all because of intentional policy interventions to ensure that there is variety of news services available to consumers.

News prominence and the role of Ofcom

10. ITN welcomes the Bill while noting there is very little detail in it relating to the specific delivery of news in the framework. As ITN highlighted earlier in this submission, the democratic value of impartial news to British audiences cannot be underestimated, and we urge parliamentarians to consider using the opportunity of the Bill's progress through parliament to highlight its value and how it can best be supported.
11. Parliamentarians can play a vital role in ensuring Ofcom helps fulfil one of the key objectives of the Media Bill: ensuring the public has easy access to high quality, regulated news and journalism in a non-linear environment. This will prevent what we have described in previous submissions as 'news deserts'.
12. ITN welcomes Ofcom's oversight of the Bill and encourages it to consider the impact of brand dilution due to a lack of prominence and visibility on platforms; a lack of access to data and no algorithmic transparency because of global platforms changing the way that audiences access and consume journalism. The UK's PSB news services are having to compete online with a range of sources that are often given the same prominence as our services, but crucially, without meeting the same standards that our content is expected to meet.
13. ITN believes that the Media Bill presents an opportunity to cement the role of the UK's unique broadcast news content as trustworthy, must-watch content for future generations overwhelmed by mis- and disinformation.
14. While linear obligations will remain in place for designated PSBs, online provisions have been left to Ofcom to monitor and consider. ITN believes that there may be a need to explicitly outline what PSB news provision online should look like in a future without scheduled TV bulletins.
15. For example, consideration should be given to how news is given prominence online. In the linear regime, news is clearly signposted by being given a prime time slot and PSBs being obligated to deliver a certain number of hours each year. The same level of detail has not been outlined in the Media Bill and ITN will be keen to understand how Ofcom will consider the questions of prominence in the online world. There are multiple questions to be considered:
 - Will designated PSB Internet Service Providers be obliged to give news prominence on their platforms?
 - While ITN supports the need for flexibility in broadcast licence discussions, will Ofcom require broadcasters to demonstrate that any proposed changes to the length or frequency of linear news bulletins will be offset by an increase in news provision online?
 - Should consideration be given to the independence of news provision in the event of changes to Channel 4's publisher/broadcaster status, ensuring that news remains impartial and overseen by a British-owned company?
 - Will there be any scrutiny of algorithmic priority for PSB news on connected devices such as smart speakers, streaming sticks and voice command search?
 - Will the designation of a Television Selection Service include guidance on prioritising news in the services they must-offer?
 - Will Ofcom consult on any changes to the delivery of news during both licence renewal negotiations as well as the transition phase from linear to digital?
16. ITN echoes calls from other quarters of the industry that Ofcom should be able to look to Parliament to implement the intentions of the Media Bill confidently and Parliament should regularly examine the work of Ofcom.

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