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Conference Item

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The BBC: The Challenge to Appeal to All Audiences

Caroline Thomson, Chief Operating Officer, BBC

POLIS Media Leadership Dialogues

London School of Economics, Tuesday 4 November

What a week – when I agreed to do this talk I thought I would focus on transforming the BBC – getting it to be a networked organisation, representing the whole of the UK with London as its hub, not its dominant force, with our plans for our new base in the Manchester region as the central theme. However, the events of last week intervened and you would all think I was mad if I didn't reflect on recent events and my emerging thinking on their implications for broadcasting and the BBC.

EVENTS

So let me first tell you a bit about my week last week:

- On **Sunday**, the Mail on Sunday ran a story about telephone calls made by BBC presenters Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand to actor Andrew Sachs, who is best known for his role as Manuel in Fawlty Towers.
- On **Monday**, the story had a bit of further coverage in the inside pages of the papers, not extensive. The Guardian, Mirror and Express were among the papers that didn't follow it. But nonetheless, we discussed it at our regular press hook up. It was clear that we had been wrong to make the

broadcast and by 10am we had issued a full apology, stating “*We recognise that some of the content broadcast was unacceptable and offensive*” and started an investigation led by the new Director of Audio & Music, Tim Davie, to find out how it got to air. The BBC Trust asked us for a report to its Editorial Standards Committee.

- On **Tuesday** the story grew and by the evening, the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister had both gone on record with their disapproval of the phone calls and the BBC’s Director of Audio & Music, Tim Davie, appeared on TV and radio to reiterate our apology from Monday and reassure that an investigation was being conducted rapidly.

- By 1130 on **Wednesday**, the Director-General announced the suspension of Russell Brand’s programme and those presented by Jonathan Ross and issued a statement saying “*I would like to add my own personal and unreserved apology to Andrew Sachs, his family and to licence fee payers for the completely unacceptable broadcast*”. That evening, Russell Brand resigned and the preliminary conclusions of the investigation were reported to the Executive team.

- On **Thursday**, Radio 2 Controller Lesley Douglas resigned, and the Director-General, Deputy Director-General, myself and the Director of Audio & Music attended an emergency meeting of the BBC Trust’s

Editorial Standards Committee. (The BBC Trust is the body entrusted with governing the BBC in the interests of licence fee payers.) That evening, both the BBC Trust and the Management issued statements about what would be happening next.

We are now engaged in rapidly but thoroughly following up on the actions proposed by Management to the Trust and the further actions required of Management by the Trust.

So as you can see, this is something that has moved very fast so far, but also that there is more work to do, and that will take some time not least because the issues it raises and our response have implications beyond the relatively contained issue of BBC compliance.

Let me be clear in case of any confusion – everything I am saying tonight is in the context that the broadcast was unacceptable. However, I think it is important to differentiate essentially two separate issues. On the one hand is the language used in the broadcast, which was obscene, and on the other, the actions of the broadcasters as they recorded the programme. The phone calls were an invasion of privacy, and their tone was uncomfortably close to bullying. That sort of activity must not happen again.

As Kelvin Mackenzie said "Edgy comedians can sometimes go over the

edgy". Now, it is our job to stop them going 'over the edgy' and to our shame we failed to do that in this case. However, what the response to this broadcast highlights is that there may also be problems for us with output which isn't 'beyond the edgy' but is on the edge.

This is illustrated by the responses last week. Some of you may have seen the vox pops with audiences queuing respectively to be in the audience for an Alan Titchmarsh show and to watch Never Mind the Buzzcocks. Perhaps unsurprisingly the Titchmarsh audience all thought the Brand broadcast was completely unacceptable, while the Buzzcocks audience broadly thought it was a storm in a teacup. Now, the Buzzcocks audience, I believe, were wrong, but the different responses highlights the territory we are in. What is completely acceptable, or even normal, to one part of the audience can be very problematic to another.

Of course both we and OFCOM do a lot of work to determine the boundaries on issues like these. We know, for example, from OFCOM's research, that in television sexual imagery is much less problematic for audiences than either violence or language. We also know that, overwhelmingly, audiences expect broadcasters to maintain high standards of taste and decency and BBC research shows that this is particularly true for us, the national public service broadcaster. However, uncomfortably for all of us, recent OFCOM work shows that we are not living up to audiences' expectations – while around 80% want high standards, only 58% think broadcasters as a whole meet

them. [I should make it clear here that this research is about the overall quality of programmes, as opposed to programme standards, eg, taste and decency.]

So we have an issue to deal with here.

However, it is complicated. The Russell Brand Show which caused all the problems last week was on radio and the most recent research on language in radio shows, and again I quote OFCOM, that 'for most of the listeners in our research, content on radio simply does not present a problem' – perhaps because the services are much more targeted and therefore audiences pre-select stations which meet their tastes. This would explain why the offending Brand broadcast attracted only two complaints from people who listened to it on the night, while three others followed by email during the next week – the other 41,995 came in response to the subsequent news reports.

It's worth noting the comments last week of former Chairman of the BBC Sir Christopher Bland, who pointed out that the re-broadcasting of the material, either as clips or transcript, would have played a part in building the number of complaints.

It also ties in with all other experience that the offence caused by language depends enormously on context; be that which station you are listening to or watching, what time (pre or post watershed) or which programme and which characters.

Take, for example, this case from EastEnders:

“You bitch!” “You slag!” “You whore!” “You slut!” (EastEnders 1998)

This line takes place during a fight between two women in EastEnders in 1998. The episode received no calls of complaint and the scene is one of the most requested pieces of EastEnders archive. The characters involved are Peggy Mitchell and Pat Butcher – two ladies of pensionable age involved in a crockery-smashing brawl over a man. This language – which Editorial Policy would advise against using nowadays – is all moderately offensive but viewers saw nothing amiss in it being used by two much-loved characters in a situation which they felt was justified. In the mouths of other characters, less popular and with less history of rivalry in the soap opera, the language would almost certainly have caused complaint today. But at either time, for the audience, context is crucial.

The problem is that different audiences would take different views. For example, research indicates that attitudes on language are divided very much on age lines.

Broadly speaking, older generations disliked the use of strongly offensive language, especially “fuck”, but were not concerned by terms of racial abuse or those relating to sexuality e.g. “queer”. Younger audiences were not concerned with “fuck” which they saw as an everyday term, but were much

more offended by racial abuse or insults relating to sexuality, disability or mental health e.g. “cripple”, “fag”.

And if there are big differences in response to language, there are also big differences between the generations in the discussion of sex. Here I am on more anecdotal territory, very little research has focussed on this area so far and given the response last week I would suggest we need to do more.

However, anecdotally, discussing the Brand issue with my twenty year old son and his student friends and with other young people and other parents I am struck by the big differences which emerge. The generation below me, the generation of most of you in the audience tonight, are not just much more relaxed discussing sex, you are more relaxed discussing more explicit sex than we are. This means, of course, you are also more relaxed about more explicit jokes about sex and indeed probably need the jokes to be more explicit to even find them funny in the first place. I, on the other hand, sometimes need to have them explained...

Given the central role of sex in comedy, not something new, and the additional complications of the acceptability of language – this is a very difficult maze to negotiate.

But the one thing that mustn't happen as a result of last week is that the BBC withdraws from comedy as a genre.

Comedy is and must remain a really important area of output for the BBC and one where we must be able to remain at the cutting edge. For some years now there has been a consensus in the industry that comedy is an area of market failure – that commercial players just can't take the risks in supporting new comedy talent.

Many of the risks are all too apparent this week, but they also include the fact that this sort of talent needs nurturing and support, often through one or two first series before they hit real success and only a public broadcaster with access to secure funds can do this. And the rewards for viewers and for Britain have been big.

Gavin & Stacey is a good example of this. James Cordon and Ruth Jones's comedy wasn't an immediate hit. It took time to grow. The twin assets of the BBC – that of having the time and patience as well as a test-bed, in this case BBC Three – meant that rather than walking away, we stuck with it. The result of this, and other great shows from Monty Python, through Fawlty Towers, The Office, Little Britain, is that our export of BBC comedy programmes has become one of the key definers of Britishness on world stage.

Of course, as with almost everything in the BBC, nothing is new and the controversy around language in comedy is a well trodden path – going back, for those of us who are long in the tooth, to Alf Garnett in 'Till Death Us Do Part'. But this doesn't mean we can sit back and just think with a bit more judgement and care exercised by those in control the issue will be solved. The

BBC management needs to ensure that extra judgement and control is indeed exercised and we will be putting the measure in place in the next few weeks to ensure that happens.

But in my view we need a longer term response. We are in difficult territory with possibly as big a divide in tastes and audience expectations as we have had to deal with since the 1960s. This presents an enormous challenge to all broadcasters as the data I quoted at the start showing that nearly half the audience feel we don't meet the standards they expect shows. And I welcome Michael Grade's call to review the use of language in television.

However, it is a particularly big challenge to the BBC with its public funding from a compulsory licence fee and with its role, as Dominic Lawson said today, as the nation's 'Auntie'. Over the next months we need a debate about these standards and an attempt to reach a new consensus. But the result must not be some rose-tinted desire to transport our public broadcaster to the 1950s. There is a world of difference between the appalling offence caused by The Russell Brand Show and the rather rich history we have of pushing the comedic envelope. I want the BBC to be in a place to find the next Gavin & Stacey, the next Ricky Gervais, the next Alan Partridge, the next Monty Python. If we don't, Britain's cultural life will be a lot duller.