

Thematic Review of Portrayal and Representation

Terms of Reference

Purpose

The subject agreed by the BBC Board for the third in its cycle of independent thematic reviews of content is a study of how accurately and authentically the BBC portrays and represents the different communities in the UK across its output.

The Board notes that, as a universally funded public broadcaster, the BBC must reflect the lives of the people of the United Kingdom and be aware of changes taking place among them. How this is achieved can be a significant factor in determining overall public approval of the BBC and perceptions of BBC impartiality. The Board further notes that it is vital to know how well BBC content is perceived to deliver on these responsibilities across audience groups and to be able to take appropriate action, where necessary.

Scope

The Review will consider the portrayal and representation of audience groups and communities across the UK which are regularly presented through BBC content across genres and platforms. Where previous thematic reviews have focused heavily on news, current affairs and factual content, this Review will include other genres, such as drama, comedy, children's and entertainment, as well as services such as BBC iPlayer and BBC Sounds. The Review will examine content and presentation in these terms over the period from April 2023 to March 2024. The joint leaders of the Review may elect to go beyond the specified period where they deem it necessary. The Review cannot, without devoting excessive resources and time to the project in the time available, evaluate in detail the coverage for all possible dimensions of the UK audience. It will therefore examine how the BBC goes about the task of providing authentic portrayal and representation of the audience and use case studies to test its effectiveness and identify any lessons which need to be learned.

Methodology

The 2021 UK Census results (although with some qualifications for those from Scotland) will provide an important basis to consider how portrayal and representation of the UK reflects current reality in terms of the make-up of communities around the country and what and where the major changes have been.

In addition, an examination of existing audience research will aid the joint leaders of the Review in refining and prioritising what they look at and identifying gaps in portrayal and representation.

The methodologies to be used will include:

External stakeholder engagement. As previous thematic reviews have demonstrated, the external consultation provides an important opportunity to engage with stakeholders and commentators who properly challenge the BBC about its representation of different communities. The external consultation is expected to include significant players in the creative industries who will provide perspectives on how ideas, stories and performers are selected and developed. They will also give views on the challenge of effectively and creatively representing a wide range of perspectives in these genres.

Audience research. The Review will consider existing research and will commission new research, as appropriate, to provide a wide understanding of audience perspectives on portrayal and representation.

Internal stakeholder input. The reviewers expect to interview principal BBC decision makers, including commissioners and channel/homepage editors, about their choices on portrayal and representation and what informs them, how these individual decisions aggregate and to what extent outcomes are appraised and used in subsequent decision-making.

Content analysis. Over the specified period, the joint leaders of the Review will assess the reality of the weekly/monthly BBC portfolio of content in terms of representation and portrayal.

Complaints. The joint leaders of the Review will consider relevant complaints about the subject matter of this Review for the specified period, together with the BBC's response.

Assessment criteria

As set out above, the Review will examine the range of portrayal and representation across the BBC's services and content over the specified period and evaluate the effectiveness of that portrayal through case studies. The Review will identify the more strategic challenges the BBC faces in delivering on this key priority and, where appropriate, make recommendations to address them.

This assessment should consider, but not be restricted to, the following:

- how well the BBC represents audience groups across its content in terms of both the quantity and quality of portrayal (including subject matter and presentation) and representation.
- how the BBC seeks to deliver the portrayal and representation required by the fourth public purpose of the Charter* through, for example, its commissioning.
- how well the BBC, in promoting its content and services to audiences, authentically portrays and represents them.
- how the BBC goes about striking a balance between reflecting individual and broader interests, as well as providing shared experiences.
- whether some audience groups or perspectives are regularly over- or under-represented or portrayed in a one-dimensional or inauthentic way.
- where any imbalances in portrayal and representation are identified, to determine what causes them and how they might be addressed.
- what drives the perceptions on portrayal and representation of the most disengaged audience groups and what the BBC might do to address them.
- what is a realistic approach to portrayal and representation in fiction genres, given the creativity required and audience expectations.
- whether storylines represent a sufficiently broad and authentic range of perspectives or if there is evidence of groupthink.
- examples of good practice in authentic portrayal and representation and how they might be replicated.

* The fourth public purpose of the BBC Royal Charter which began on 1 January, 2017 states: *“The BBC should reflect the diversity of the United Kingdom both in its output and services. In doing so, the BBC should accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the United Kingdom today, and raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up its society. It should ensure that it provides output and services that meet the needs of the United Kingdom’s nations, regions and communities. The BBC should bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom. In commissioning and delivering output the BBC should invest in the creative economies of each of the nations and contribute to their development.”*

This Review will consider the BBC’s expertise in and approach to maintaining fair and authentic portrayal and representation across UK audiences and how this might be strengthened for the future.

The joint leaders of the Review will submit their findings to the BBC Board, along with any recommendations that they choose to make. The Board will determine the arrangements for publishing the Review once it has received and considered it.

Joint leaders of the Review.

The Board has invited Anne Morrison and Chris Banatvala to undertake the Review as joint leaders, and they have accepted.

28th May, 2024