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**Why children’s news matters:  
The case of CBBC *Newsround* in the UK**

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**Abstract:** There has never been a greater need for reliable, truthful news to help citizens navigate and assess the veracity of what they are reading and viewing, especially on social media. Widespread concerns around ‘fake’ news demonstrate an enduring requirement for curated and trustworthy children’s news that addresses children as young citizens with certain rights. Drawing on recent UK events, we discuss the case for children’s news provision by public service broadcasting (PSB) from a communication rights perspective by analyzing the BBC’s 2019 plans to reduce the broadcast presence and originated hours of its flagship news service, *Newsround*, in favor of online distribution.

**Keywords:** BBC, children’s news, children’s rights, *Newsround*, public service broadcasting

## 1 Introduction

Despite widespread agreement that production of trustworthy news is central to the health of democratic societies, particularly in times of political, economic, ecological, and public health insecurity, children’s news is not generally regarded as a core policy issue. Producing it is expensive and labor-intensive, but some European public service broadcasting (PSB) organizations, notably in the UK (CBBC’s *Newsround*) but also in the Netherlands (NPO’s *Jeugdjournaal*) and in Germany (ZDF’s *Logo*), have made it a key feature, regarding it as essential for fostering children’s sense of belonging as citizens (Buckingham, 2000; Carter, 2017; Clark and Marchi, 2018; Mendes, Carter, and Messenger Davies, 2011; Narberhaus, 2016). However, shifts in how children consume screen content across multiple platforms, combined with PSB budget cuts and the need to better serve

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a greater range of interests and diverse audiences, are forcing broadcasters to rethink how they meet PSB obligations to children (Potter and Steemers, 2020). These obligations are not always clearly set out in PSB statutes. In this respect the UK is unusual because the BBC's original 2017 Operating Licence, administered by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), expressly obliged it to provide news for children, including a quota of 85 hours of broadcast news per year (Ofcom, 2017a, p. 11), a requirement which does not apply to its PSB Dutch and German counterparts. In the BBC's most recent Operating Licence, *Newsround's* obligation was reduced to 35 hours (Ofcom, 2020a, p. 11).

Within a European context, we consider the role and significance of news provision for children aged 6 to 12, its target audience. We also reflect upon the policy positions and wider implications for children's communication rights of the BBC's 2020 reduction of broadcast and originated hours for *Newsround* in favor of increased online delivery.

In this policy context, widespread concerns about 'fake' news, for instance, demonstrate an enduring need for curated and trustworthy children's news, rooted in global commitments to children's communication rights set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). Specifically, Article 13 confirms the commitment to protect children's rights to freedom of expression, including "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds". In Article 17, the mass media are required to "ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources", although news is not specifically mentioned. A focus on children's rights is important because it goes to the heart of debates about what sort of news is appropriate for children, the power of news to influence, and how children are framed within research, as either active and critical (Alon-Tirosh and Lemish, 2014; Carter, 2007; Kaziaj and van Bauwel, 2017) or passive and fearful of news (Cantor, Byrne, Moyer-Gusé, and Riddle, 2010; Smith, Pieper, and Moyer-Gusé, 2011; Van der Molen and Konijn, 2007). It also raises questions about the extent to which children's voices are heard when it comes to policymaking about children's media content, including news.

Bearing this in mind, the questions we address here focus on 1) the role and significance of children's news as part of PSB's wider remit within a transforming media landscape; 2) how policy around children's news has been framed and articulated and by whom, using the BBC's proposals for *Newsround* and stakeholder responses as a case study; and 3) the longer-term implications for PSB's commitment to children's news and responsiveness to children's voices in a multiplatform environment where children have rights. The research combines analysis of the role of children's news within PSB with an evaluation of how recent UK policy interventions have impacted this provision, drawing on a range of stakeholder documents.

In the next section, we outline key principles and values underpinning PSB news provision for children and how this connects with academic debates about children's news. Touching briefly on the examples of *Logo!* and *Jeugdjournaal* in relation to our main object of study, *Newsround*, we situate the development of children's news in a European context to demonstrate its centrality as part of a wider PSB commitment to serving child audiences, as an issue of children's civic rights, and as a provision valued by children and parents across Europe (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2020).

From there we consider the extent to which the BBC's proposals for *Newsround* in 2019 generated stakeholder positions around the importance of children's news. We use elements of stakeholder analysis (Van den Bulck, 2019) as a framework for understanding the policy process and outcomes on this issue: namely, the BBC's decision to reduce both first-run originations of children's news and the frequency and length of broadcast news bulletins in favor of shorter bulletins on its streaming platform iPlayer. Critical analysis of BBC plans, regulatory authority Ofcom's reasoning for accepting them, and consultation responses of key stakeholders offer a first step in understanding the rationale for PSB children's news and the extent to which children influence its form, content, and delivery.

Finally, we contemplate the longer-term implications of potential policy failure in regulating for children's news as part of a public service remit. This connects with a wider children's rights discourse where decisions are often taken without consulting children and without research-informed analysis of the changing shape and volume of news, journalistic news values, scheduling, platform choices, technological transformation, and a deeper understanding of how children find and access news (Carter et al., 2009; Notley, Deuanni, Zhong, and Howden, 2017).

## 2 The role and significance of children's news

In western democracies, reliable, fact-based news provision holding 'truth to power' and the powerful accountable (Pavlik, Alsaad, and Laufer, 2020) is central to active and informed participation in civic debate. Without fair, balanced, and impartial news, "a future of apathy, alienation and the abuse of political power" is forecast (Buckingham, 2000, p. vii). While these arguments about the societal value of news are consistently made about news for adults, they are less frequent in studies about children's news, with some exceptions (Mihailidis, 2014). Where research has been undertaken, it has tended to focus on likely negative emotional

effects of adult news on children (Cantor and Nathanson, 1996; Van der Molen, 2001; Van der Molen, Valkenberg, and Peeters, 2002), assuming they lack the cognitive skills to safely process news. Cantor, Byrne, Moyer-Gusé, and Riddle (2010) and others argue children should be protected from excessive exposure to adult news, particularly from 'inappropriate' violent content (Smith, Pieper, and Moyer-Gusé, 2011; Valkenberg, Van der Molen, and Peeters, 2001). Van der Molen and Konijn (2007) further suggest 'boring' adult issues, including politics, should be avoided because these topics are inherently uninteresting to children or not pertinent to their lives.

However, other research has shown what children tend to mean by 'boring' is that politics, as it is practiced and how it tends to be reported, rarely relates to the politics of children's everyday lives (Buckingham, 2000; Carter, 2019; Carter et al., 2009). Such studies demonstrate children are often keenly interested in certain political issues, such as the environment, where they want their concerns about the planet's future to be heard by adults (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Clark and Marchi, 2017). The activities of climate activist Greta Thunberg offer a pertinent example of this.

In response to research outlining the negative emotional impact of news on children, some criticize what they see as censorship, sanitization, and dumbing down of children's news because of adult assumptions about potential harm to children's emotional wellbeing. For instance, Matthews (2009) concluded from his newsroom ethnography at *Newsround* in the early 2000s that producers often viewed audiences as young consumers largely uninterested in serious news. This assumption, he argues, "delimits the *Newsround* audience's access to news discussions of important adult issues" (p. 2) because the prioritization of entertainment neglects issues about which young citizens have a right to know (Matthews, 2008, p. 15). Given the BBC's PSB remit to provide news to help citizens understand pressing issues of the day, the accusation that it assumes one section of the audience, children, are incapable of comprehending those issues, no matter how they are narrativized, is problematic.

Whilst it is reasonable to expect news for children to be sensitive to their varying abilities to handle difficult and upsetting stories, responsible, public service-oriented provision routinely includes content that takes account of children's developing maturity. For proponents of children's news, attempts to unnecessarily shield children from what is happening in the world are likely to undermine their citizenship (Messenger Davies, Carter, Allen, and Mendes, 2014; Donders and Van den Bulck, 2020). In this case, provision first acknowledges children as citizens possessing communication and information rights, requiring skills to be activated, if they are to become engaged in the world. Wallis and Buckingham (2016), for example, argue children require the analytical tools of critical

media literacy to assess what is being reported, how, why, and in whose interests to become active, informed citizens. In its public mandate to support and develop children and young people's news literacy, UK regulator Ofcom has paid particular attention to their ability to spot 'fake news' as well as commercial manipulation (Ofcom, 2017b, 2020b). For its part, the *Newsround* website regularly offers advice on how to identify 'fake news' and misinformation, especially from social media, encouraging children to think critically about the source's reliability, whether images are old or edited, asking why it was shared, by whom, and if posts appear to have a personal or political agenda (*Newsround*, 2020). From a PSB perspective, a key component of this approach is a clear commitment to universalism of reach, access, and public trust (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2020), but this does not necessarily take account of what children value about PSB.

If children's news grounded in PSB principles is essential to children's development as well-informed, responsible, and active citizens, then it matters that children's issues and voices, in all their diversity, are heard in conversations about what is happening locally, nationally, and around the world. As earlier indicated, the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) sets out the international, legal obligations of state signatories,<sup>1</sup> in respect of children's information and communication rights. Hamelink (2008, p. 516) argues that Articles 17 and 13 are most relevant because they require states to "[e]ncourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child" (Art. 17a), while simultaneously allowing states to issue guidelines to protect children from information "injurious to his or her well-being" (Art. 17e), and issue restrictions on children's rights of expression in the interests of national security, public order, or the "rights or reputations of others" (Art. 13.2).

Although the UNCRC has limitations, other interventions, such as the 1995 non-statutory Children's Television Charter (Home, 1995) introduced at the first World Summit on Media for Children (WSMFC), have also sought to reinforce children's rights, in this case access to "high quality" TV programs which "allow children to develop physically, mentally, and socially to their fullest potential" (Clause 1). Clause 6 is clear about public responsibility to finance high-quality children's informational content. In other words, it is not enough to say children have rights without states providing structures and funding to make rights realizable. This is where public interventions, notably through PSB, have been paramount. For some time there has been growing unease about children's rights in a digital world designed by and for adults. One result was the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child's call for consultations in 2020, and adoption in March

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1 The US signed but has not ratified the convention.

2021, of “General Comment No. 25 on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment”. Section VI states the digital environment provides opportunities to realize children’s right to access information, and states are encouraged to produce and disseminate content widely “using multiple formats and from a plurality of national and international sources, including news media, broadcasters” and other cultural organizations (p. 9). Section III (General principles), subsection D, reiterates and updates points originally made in Article 12 of the UNCRC, requiring states to give “due weight” to the views of children, and to provide them with the opportunity “to be heard” in judicial and administrative proceedings that affect them “either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body”.

In respect of decisions about news provision and a UN obligation to listen to and consult children, there now exists a rather precarious set of stakeholder relationships between children, children’s news providers, advocacy groups, policymakers, regulators, and commercial interests, in a transforming media landscape where consultation of children is not always a factor in policymaking, thus weakening children’s rights. Decisions are largely being made by adults on what types of content to produce (if anything), scheduling, platform delivery, and regulation (Steemers, 2019). Adults are also making decisions about what children need, which may not fairly represent children’s views, although civically engaged, public service-oriented, responsible news for children would suggest their input is required now more than ever. Although our focus is on changes within the BBC, there are examples in Europe and elsewhere (Lemish and Götz, 2007) of a longstanding tradition of PSB news for child audiences as well as perceptions of children’s rights that underpin PSB obligations to them.

For example, *Logo!*, a live ten-minute news show produced by the German Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) since 1989, broadcast on the children’s channel KiKa at 7:50 pm Saturday to Thursday and Fridays at 7:25 pm, operates under a clear rights discourse. Producers explicitly acknowledge children have a right to information as set out in Article 17 of the UNCRC (*Logo!*, 2014). Rather than seeing news as inherently upsetting or boring to children, they insist “information brings more emotional security into children’s world than fearful concealment. The more children learn about their environment, the better they can classify what they hear and see in everyday life” (ZDF, 2020). Producers claim a relationship of trust because children know they will have their questions answered truthfully and clearly. Crucially, children routinely contribute to *Logo!* as on-air reporters and via website interactions and feedback. *Logo!*’s producers see it as their responsibility to answer children’s questions even when they are difficult, like “Why is there war?” or “Why are so many unemployed in Germany?” (ZDF, 2020).

*Jeugdjournaal*, produced by Dutch public broadcaster Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO), also seeks to engage children directly. Marking its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021, the website notes that when it was launched some adults regarded children's news as a "bad idea", believing that "children would never be interested in news" (*Jeugdjournaal*, 2021). Although there are no child reporters, before Covid-19 editors routinely invited one class of students per month to their Hilversum headquarters to observe how news is made (*Jeugdjournaal*, 2020). Through its website "Propositions and Questions", children can offer ideas, ask questions, and provide insights directly to editors. For instance, by September 16, 2020 children had commented 358 times on the topic "Keeping fit was difficult during the strict corona measures", sharing their experiences and in so doing constructing a sense of a varied community of young people. Broadcast daily as a five-minute bulletin at 8:45 am and a 20-minute evening bulletin at 7:00 pm on the NPO Zapp children's block, *Jeugdjournal* is also strongly promoted on a website and a news app, and is officially available on YouTube and Instagram.

*Newsround* preceded both *Logo!* and *Jeugdjournal*, having first aired on BBC1 in 1972. It came about partly because the BBC thought it might be a worthy program, addressing the Corporation's commitment to children's civic engagement, and partly because there was an awkward gap in BBC1's early evening schedule (Messenger Davies et al., 2014). Very quickly, it attracted sizeable audiences, which grew into millions at its height of popularity in the 1980s. From the start, *Newsround* was widely regarded as providing a newscast that took children seriously as a news audience, including stories from adult news as well as those of particular interest to children (school, bullying, music, sport, animals, environment) delivered in 'child-friendly' language. When long-term presenter John Craven left in 1989, *Newsround*'s format changed with younger presenters/reporters, a different mode of address, a livelier set, eye-catching graphics, and more frequent scheduling. Between 1992 and 2013, the *Press Pack* (a journalism club) was a regular feature encouraging children to engage with news by writing a story for the TV bulletin or website. An interactive website with message boards was launched in 2001, one of the first of its kind in the world (Levell, 2001).

In 2013, *Newsround* moved from mainstream channel BBC1 to children's digital channel, CBBC, and bulletins were reduced to 3–5 minutes (in contrast to the longer bulletins of *Logo!* and *Jeugdjournaal*). Past presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy, now a Channel 4 news anchor, was concerned that shorter bulletins were "too brief for detailed reporting on major stories", which had been "one of the show's strengths" (as cited in Marsden, 2012). CBBC Director, Joe Godwin, said at the time:

CBBC is the place the vast majority of kids in the UK tune into to watch *Newsround* and their other favourite children's shows. So, it feels for us the right time to stop the regular blocks of children's programming on BBC One and Two (as cited in Marsden, 2012).

However, the move ghettoized the bulletin, and audiences began to steadily decline (Blackall, 2019; Table 1).

Similar arguments were put forward by *Newsround* to Ofcom in late 2019, contending the BBC should be allowed to reduce originated television news hours due to falling audiences in favor of increased online provision. Expressing concern about the move to digital platforms, *Newsround* presenter Ricky Boletto stated that although “audiences are changing, and the way young kids watch TV is moving fast ..., I worry that as we chase the clicks, we lose focus on what really matters” (as cited in Blackall, 2019). Also criticizing the move to digital, former *Newsround* editor Sinead Rocks commented:

*Newsround* needs more prominence – not less. The ability to watch with parents/families is also important. Relying mainly on a child's ability and interest to seek it out online is short-sighted and sad (as cited in Blackall, 2019).

As with the move from BBC One to CBBC in 2013, the shift towards online provision appears to have been motivated more by technology and market-driven changes than understanding the needs and interests of child audiences, whom they presume to know, often with little or no consultation.

This short contextual background points to what some regard as a worrying erosion of broadcast news provision for British children. It may be used as a warning to European children's news providers about what can happen when corporate and technological priorities take precedence over children's communication rights. In the next section, we look in detail at the BBC's contentious submission to Ofcom in late 2019 to better understand the complexities of stakeholder positions around public service commitments to support the information and communication rights of young citizens.

### **3 Stakeholder engagement with Ofcom's 2019 consultation on BBC children's news**

Having considered the role and significance of public service children's news, it is useful to look at how it is perceived at a time of media transformations demanding swift reactions from broadcasters and regulators. Using the BBC's proposals



for *Newsround* and stakeholder responses as a case study provides insights into how policy around children's news is being framed, by whom, and why.

## The *Newsround* consultation process

Debate about BBC children's news provision was precipitated by the BBC's request to Ofcom in July 2019 to alter its Operating License to allow it to reduce children's broadcast news hours in favor of online provision. It should be noted that the BBC is the only UK public service broadcaster with an Ofcom license that includes children's news quotas, an obligation that does not extend to commercially funded broadcasters with minimal public service obligations and no quotas on children's content (ITV, Channel 4, Five). In 2017, all three commercial PSBs produced only three hours of children's factual content (Ofcom, 2018, p. 4).

The BBC's rationale was that it needed to shift resources from linear provision of *Newsround*, whose audiences were declining, to its website where they were migrating (BBC, 2019a). *Newsround* producers wanted a change from three five-minute daily broadcast bulletins and four to ten online stories to one five-minute daily broadcast bulletin and up to 20 online stories including up to four video reports (Ofcom, 2019, p. 8). The BBC's arguments were linked to challenges it claimed to face not only from audiences moving online but also in channeling its resources.

**Table 1:** *Newsround* audiences.

	2012	2014	2018	2019	2020
Weekly <i>Newsround</i> TV audience among 6- to 12-year-olds	676,000 (BBC 1)			286,000 (CBBC)	
Average audience per TV bulletin		74,000 *47,000:6-9 yrs *27,000:10-12 yrs	35,000 • 17,000:6-9 yrs • 18,000:10-12 yrs	37,000	24,000 in April and May 2020
Online – average weekly number of unique browsers (any age)		152,000		903,000	1.72m in Week 19
BBC survey data about 6- to 12-year-olds' use of <i>Newsround</i> website per week				11% or 600,000 claim to access <i>Newsround</i> online once a week	

Source: BBC, 2019a, p. 5; Ofcom, 2019, pp. 9–12; Ofcom 2020a, p. 19.

The Corporation argued that while child audiences for the CBBC children's channel, including *Newsround*, were declining, *Newsround*'s online audience had grown from 152,000 unique website users in 2014 to 903,000 in 2019 (Ofcom,

2019, p. 9). Audiences did decline after a move from generalist channel BBC1 to CBBC in 2013, but it was not clear what proportion of the growing online audience comprised children (see Table 1). While the Corporation expressed a desire to increase “the impact” of *Newsround*, to deliver “better value for money” and “raise awareness of the brand” (BBC, 2019a, p. 8), it divulged little in its proposals about what its audience felt about news, or how it intended to promote the brand beyond its own CBBC/*Newsround* website and the BBC’s on-demand streaming platform, iPlayer.

In response, Ofcom published a consultation document on 15 November 2019 to look at these proposals in the context of the BBC’s delivery of “distinctive output and its mission and public purpose” but also in respect of any impact the changes might have “on fair and effective competition” (2019, p. 1). Industry impact seemed to be weighted equally with the impact on children from the start.

Within this context, stakeholder analysis (Van den Bulck, 2019) provides the analytical framework for understanding the policy process and outcomes on this issue: namely the BBC’s wish to reduce first-run broadcast originations of BBC children’s news from 85 to 35 hours a year and the frequency of broadcast news bulletins in favor of a ‘digital first’ proposition (BBC, 2019a, p. 4).

Critical analysis of the BBC’s (2019a) initial plans for *Newsround*, regulatory authority Ofcom’s (2019) reasoning for accepting the plans from the outset, and the consultation responses of key stakeholders about the *Newsround* proposals offer a first step in understanding the rationale for Ofcom’s decision in July 2020 to largely acquiesce to the BBC’s demands, having become the BBC’s regulator in 2018. Even before the consultation, Ofcom broadly accepted the BBC’s proposals, namely the request to scale back broadcast news in favor of online output because of the decline in the weekly reach of the CBBC channel to 13.5% by March 2020 among 6- to 12-year-olds (Ofcom, 2020c, p. 7), and what Ofcom saw as the BBC’s need to “innovate and adapt its approach” to younger audiences (Ofcom, 2019, p. 1). The only new safeguard Ofcom (2019) was prepared to consider was a requirement of the BBC to deliver children’s daily news online “in a range of different formats, including text-based articles, videos and interactive pieces; covers a broad range of topics; and features in-depth news and analysis” (p. 15). It did not feel it was necessary to set a quantitative minimum on numbers of daily news stories online. The assumption was that the changes would be made, and the impact of “and satisfaction with *Newsround* both online and on linear by demographic groups” would be examined *later* through performance metrics (Ofcom, 2019, p. 18).

Ofcom (2019) acknowledged the risks of the proposed changes for younger children, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who typically engage less with *Newsround* online than the television bulletin (pp. 10–12;

Table 2). It admitted it was not entirely sure “children will actively seek out news on the *Newsround* website of their own accord”, not least because the BBC “was unable to provide specific evidence” (p. 11) that this audience had significantly moved to online news consumption. This suggested a degree of uncertainty about how children would discover and engage with news without clearer plans for promotion and dissemination.

**Table 2:** *Newsround* audience profiles (6–12 years).

	ABC1 2018	ABC1 2019	C2DE 2018	C2DE 2019	Boys	Girls
All TV bulletins	54%		46%		41%	59%
07:40 bulletin	66.1%	27,000	33.9%	11,000		
08.20 bulletin	57.8%	28,000	42.2%	13,000		
16.20 bulletin	47.2%	17,000	52.8%	13,000		
<i>Newsround</i> online content engagement	62%		38%		47%	53%

Sources: BBC, 2019a, pp. 9–10; Ofcom, 2020a, p. 17.

## Identifying the stakeholders

In total there were 37 consultation responses in 2019, and Ofcom published 20 of the non-confidential ones online (see Table 3). It received “16 identical submissions from parents who protested against the proposed changes to *Newsround*” (Ofcom, 2020c, p. 6), although since the consultation was not widely promoted to parents, it was unsurprising that few responded. Only three short submissions identify as being from parents among the 20 Ofcom published. Children are the one stakeholder group whose voices were not represented in the consultation. This is surprising as Ofcom undertakes a significant amount of research with children including an annual tracker where issues around the veracity and value of news sources have been examined with older children, aged 12–15, who regard BBC News as the most trustworthy among leading online information brands (72%), ahead of WhatsApp (59%) (Ofcom, 2020d, p. 34). In the absence of children’s voices, it is interesting to see how and to which extent the different stakeholders accepted the value of news for children.

Interestingly, while *Newsround* frequently reports on media issues of relevance to children, such as online harm and cyberbullying, the BBC’s proposals were not reported in *Newsround* bulletins while the consultation was underway. Nor did *Newsround* report Ofcom findings in July 2020 when the regulator issued its final statement. *Newsround* only told its audience about the changes on August 30, 2020.

**Table 3:** Published submissions to Ofcom's 2019 consultation.

ADVOCACY GROUPS	INDUSTRY INTERESTS	INDIVIDUALS
CMF: Children's Media Foundation RNIB: Royal National Institute of Blind People VLV: Voice of the Listener and Viewer)	<u>Broadcasters</u> BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation <u>Commercial Content Providers</u> First News <u>Film Institutes</u> BFI: British Film Institute <u>Professional Associations</u> COBA: Commercial On-Demand and Broadcasting Association Directors UK Pact Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television Writers' Guild of Great Britain	<u>Parents</u> Save Newsround Anonymous Name withheld 5 H Thomas <u>Academics</u> R. Beveridge Steemers, Carter, Messenger Davies <u>Others</u> Name withheld 1 Name withheld 2 Name withheld 3 Name withheld 4 Name withheld 6

Source: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-3/bbc-childrens-change-operating-licence>

The 20 published submissions (Table 3) can be split into *industry interests*; *advocacy groups* including VLV and CMF, who represent license-fee payers' and children's interests, respectively; and *individual submissions* from academics (2),<sup>2</sup> parents (3), and anonymous submissions (5), which may have been made by industry professionals. As such, the submissions represented a 'policy community' (Kingdon, 2011, p. 123), who identify with policy issues around children's content. The most detailed responses, forming the primary focus of this analysis, came from the same core group of advocacy and industry stakeholders (BBC, BFI, CMF, COBA, VLV, PACT) who had responded to Ofcom's earlier Children's Content Review in 2017, and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's consultation on contestable funding for children's content in 2018. With the exception of the BBC, COBA, and PACT, all submissions were opposed to, or had strong reservations about, the *Newsround* proposals.

The BBC's proposals, Ofcom's framing of the issue (see previous section), and stakeholder responses provide insights into views about the role of children's news and the extent to which stakeholders subscribe to its public service value. Three positions (or potential advocacy coalitions) emerged. The first coalition was between Ofcom and the BBC, who were pushing for changes, having already decided what needed doing on the basis of falling broadcast audiences (see previous section). Second were those who foregrounded the BBC's obligation as a public service news provider for young citizens (see next section). Third were industry interests, who said little or nothing about *Newsround* and the value

<sup>2</sup> The authors also submitted evidence (Steemers, Carter, and Messenger Davies, 2019), but exclude their submission from the analysis on the grounds of objectivity.

of children's news because they were more concerned with issues around news provision that affected their economic interests (First News, 2019), terms of trade, and production budgets (PACT, 2019), or the prominence of CBBC in electronic program guides (COBA, 2019). Throughout the process there was no engagement or consultation with children.

## Stakeholder positions

Advocacy groups, such as CMF and VLV, argued that public service children's news provision was best positioned to support children's communication rights as young citizens. For VLV (2019), television bulletins were crucial for children, "whose knowledge, interests and enthusiasms are so much less developed than those of adults" (p. 6) and for whom they provided the opportunity "to learn about things they did not know about and would therefore not have sought out for themselves" (p. 6). It added that *Newsround* is "an essential tool to help the development of children by providing them with engaging, entertaining and informative content which helps them understand the world around them and their place in it" (p. 3). The CMF drew attention to Ofcom's own lack of confidence about whether younger children, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, would seek out *Newsround* online (2019, p. 1). For the CMF (2019), "reducing the footprint of *Newsround*" was "unwise at a time when more and more young people are taking to activism and social or political engagement" (p. 3). According to CMF (2019):

The BBC should embrace its public service obligation, ensure *Newsround* is widely available on a variety of platforms, and take pride in and promote *Newsround* as a rare, trusted source of information in an increasingly confusing content environment (p. 3).

Yet these were also positions taken by those who were more aligned with industry. The Writers Guild of Great Britain (WGGB; 2019) called the changes "an erosion of an important part of the BBC's public service function to young people" (p. 1). For the BFI (2019), which runs the Young Audience Content Fund (YACF), an alternative government-funded initiative for public service children's content, and therefore a potential rival to the BBC, the provision of "impartial news and information to help all audiences to engage with the world around them" was "a cornerstone of the BBC's offer to this demographic" (p. 1). It was therefore "essential that the BBC continues to produce news content for children and young people" (p. 1). More serious for the BFI was the way children "'navigat[ed] the internet" and the use of algorithms which in their view "risks obstructing the BBC's ability

to ensure they engage with issues beyond the locus of personal interest and/or opinion” reinforced by “online ‘filter bubbles’” (BFI, 2019, p. 2).

Several who opposed the changes raised questions about the accuracy of BBC data on website visits (BFI, CMF, VLV), and pulled apart arguments about declining viewers, pointing to the move from BBC1 to CBBC in 2013 and poor scheduling as contributory factors in *Newsround*'s decline after 2013 (CMF, 2019). Directors UK (2019) noted that in 2018, 79% of children aged 4–15 still watched broadcast television every week compared to a weekly reach of only 12% of children aged 6–12 for CBBC on the iPlayer (p. 2). For the BFI (2019), the BBC's proposals were risky, lacking detail about the “range of content” it intended to provide online and how it would reach children from the most financially disadvantaged backgrounds (C2DE), who watch *Newsround* less frequently (Table 2), or those who do not have ready access to online devices (pp. 2–3), a concern repeated by other industry groupings, including Directors UK (2019, p. 2) and the WGGB (2019, p. 1).

Opponents of the changes pointed to the BBC's lack of engagement with YouTube and Instagram platforms (CMF, 2019, p. 6; VLV, 2019), which, according to the CMF (2019), are “vital to increase reach and to provide a news service where older children are actually viewing” (p. 4). These were not arguments that everything should stay the same. There was acknowledgement that *Newsround* needed to evolve to respond to an increasingly digital media environment, but also questioning of how the BBC actually intended to drive engagement and discoverability online without a clear strategy that would not damage news provision in the longer term.

## Consultation outcomes

A key finding from the consultation is there was little, if any, in-depth research about *Newsround*'s audience, except in relation to falling numbers for the BBC's broadcast bulletins and growing numbers of users for the website, although the BBC's claims about this were disputed (see above). In the Corporation's submission, with a December publication date, the BBC (2019b) suddenly claimed to “regularly host groups of children and schools so we can understand their opinions on *Newsround* and ask what they want to see covered” (p. 4), although the findings of these consultations were not divulged. It claimed to want to get “better understanding of teachers' engagement with *Newsround*, particularly online” (p. 6), thus “ensuring 6- to 9-year-olds and C2DE audiences do not lose out from the changes” (p. 7), as Ofcom had highlighted previously, thus suggesting a retrofitting of arguments.

In a final statement, delayed to July 2020 due to the Covid-19 lockdown, Ofcom (2020c) reinforced their decision to allow the BBC to reduce *Newsround's* broadcast hours, pointing to BBC data as irrefutable evidence of a continuing decline in viewing of the bulletin and the CBBC channel (see Table 1), and thus the need to endorse *Newsround's* plan (p. 2). This conclusion overrode any misgivings raised in consultation submissions. Ofcom's only concession was to make small adjustments to the formats and range of news covered and to promise to monitor the changes "closely" with new metrics. The decision about the reduction was irreversible.

There was little sense throughout the consultation of what children wanted and valued in children's news. Largely unacknowledged was the fact that *Newsround's* broadcast decline was also attributable to ghettoization on CBBC. Other research has suggested children's news is likely to be more successful in securing audiences if children are consulted and their contributions are regarded as central in terms of content development, embedding audience interactivity to ensure relevance and making children's civic engagement central to any new provision (Alon-Tirosh and Lemish, 2014; Carter et al., 2009). The consultation made apparent that little is known about the extent to which *Newsround* directly and consistently engages with their audience.

Stakeholders did not have the resources to evidence children's engagement with news, unlike the BBC, which was scant in providing detailed proof. However, Ofcom's own findings repeatedly show broadcast television is still regarded as the most accurate (85%) and most trustworthy (84%) source of news among older children aged 12–15, ahead of social media, which at 39% is ranked the least trustworthy (Ofcom, 2020e, p. 16). This was reinforced during the Covid pandemic (Ofcom, 2020b), as young people aged 12–15 became more distrustful of online sources: 72% accessed TV news about Covid compared to 48% who used social media (p. 1), and BBC news was highly trusted (87%) (p. 2). However, these findings were not referenced in Ofcom's final conclusions. The 9% proportion of children aged 12–15 who use *Newsround* (Ofcom, 2020e, p. 18) is hardly surprising as they do not constitute the core audience of 6- to 12-year-olds, and no research has been undertaken by Ofcom on younger children's news consumption and attitudes. What was remarkable about the consultation was the speed at which it was enacted (November-December 2019), the decision ahead of consultation, and compression of the process, which excluded children.

For the BBC, the outcome was positive with the removal of the afternoon broadcast bulletin in favor of one morning bulletin and a reduction in broadcast originations to 35 hours a year. In a blog, *Newsround* editor Paul Plunkett (2020) praised Ofcom's decision and stated it was not "about saving money – the amount we spend on *Newsround* will stay the same". At eight minutes, the daily bulletin at 7:45 am is longer than the five minutes originally promised.

One further outcome is that the BBC launched a *Newsround* YouTube channel on September 1, 2020, something it had not contemplated in its original proposals but which was recommended in several stakeholder submissions (CMF, BFI). For CMF (2020), Ofcom's decision was "unambitious". Reflecting on the BBC's recent attempts to reinstate BBC Three as an online youth channel (since officially announced in March 2021), it questioned:

... the shortsighted decision to simply follow the numbers game and not consider the bigger picture in which *Newsround* is a major contributor to the BBC's reputation for truth, honesty, clarity and multi-platform delivery of information when it is needed (CMF, 2020).

The BBC did not consult or reach out to children in new ways, so in this sense, the CMF concluded, it failed its child audience.

## 4 Conclusions

Although this paper might be read as simply reporting on a typical small-scale response by the BBC to budgetary pressures, it can also be regarded as a cautionary tale for other European countries, if children are not consulted about their information and communication rights, and if policymakers fail to provide necessary safeguards to protect these rights. This episode is also a warning for future policy issues around children's rights in the digital world, where decisions about the digital environment are largely made for and by adults.

We have critically assessed positions taken by stakeholders on *Newsround's* decision to reduce original broadcast hours in direct relation to the value of public service news for children so as to highlight how the lack of consultation with children undermines their right to be consulted on matters affecting them. From this, several conclusions may be drawn. Firstly, making audience size a priority, without addressing promotion and direct engagement with children, undermines PSB's commitment to children's information and communication rights, as these invariably take second place to corporate priorities around market share and resources. Secondly, in the BBC's case, changes in programming policy rarely, if ever, include discussion with children, at least not in robust evidence-based ways that take account of context (promotion, availability, discovery) and risk disregarding children's voices. Thirdly, the fact the BBC still produces children's news depends largely on its obligation to do so in its license, albeit a decidedly reduced one since Ofcom's decision in 2020. In the wider context, this represents a lowering of expectations by Ofcom, which has consistently conceded on public service obligations to children, particularly by the UK's commercially funded



public service broadcasters, whose commitments to original children’s content have dropped dramatically since the removal of statutory quotas in 2003 from 308 hours in 2006 to 86 hours in 2016 (Ofcom, 2017c, p. 22). Finally, as part of a general overview of public service media, Ofcom is now arguing for a relaxation of public service commitments overall, with fewer quantitative requirements, and a definition of public service media suggesting a further shift to online distribution in “a more flexible framework” (Ofcom, 2020f).

What has happened in the UK highlights an erosion of children’s rights to information and communication designed to inform and support their development as young citizens. The BBC’s decision and Ofcom’s position raise serious questions and concerns about the future orientation of children’s content at the BBC as political and financial pressures on it as an institution suggest more focus on the consumer citizen with rather less attention paid to its obligations relating to informing children as a civic and moral responsibility. In this sense it is not change that is an issue but instead an underdeveloped understanding of the audience, which is a common feature of policymaking for children.

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