

New rules to protect 'distinctively British' public service broadcasting

- New requirements on PSBs to make “distinctively British” shows that are “iconic, not generic”
- New ‘must carry’ obligations for PSB content on digital platforms

Media Minister John Whittingdale has announced new measures today to protect the creation of uniquely British TV, and help public service broadcasters (PSBs) compete with the US streaming giants in the digital age.

Shows such as Dr Who, Downton Abbey, Great British Bake Off, Top Gear, The Bodyguard and Planet Earth have been huge international hits but also reflect Britain and British values.

In his keynote speech to the Royal Television Society Cambridge Convention, Mr Whittingdale announced plans to expand the types of programmes the nation’s PSBs are required to produce and air to include ‘distinctively British’ content.

In the face of increased foreign investment and competition, the move will ensure the UK continues to be a creative powerhouse for unique, high-quality TV shows which showcase British culture and are enjoyed the world over.

The Media Minister also announced new plans to legislate to ensure PSB content is always carried and discoverable to UK audiences on connected devices and major online platforms – including smart TVs, set-top boxes and streaming sticks – as more and more viewers turn to them over traditional TV.

Proposals for these measures will be included in a Broadcasting White Paper to be published this autumn.

New ‘Britishness’ requirements

UK PSBs currently have requirements in their remits to broadcast ‘original’ content. This was previously considered sufficient to ensure their programming had a characteristically British dimension.

However, the globalisation of broadcasting means that more of the content we watch is set in non-specific locations or outside the UK, with an international cast, communicating in US English. This risks TV made in the UK becoming indistinguishable from that produced elsewhere and less relevant for UK audiences, as well as minimising its proven soft power abroad.

Ministers are therefore considering adding to the definition of ‘original productions’ and making the focus of the PSB system more explicit on content that contributes to British culture and allows UK audiences to see their own way of life and representations of themselves reflected on TV.

In his [speech](#), Mr Whittingdale said:

Global investment is extremely welcome – but I want to make sure it doesn't water down British creativity or the British brand.

Public service broadcasters have a unique role and I want them to continue producing shows that allow people in every corner of the UK to see their lives reflected on screen, and that showcase the things we are most proud of to the rest of the world. To make programmes that are iconic, not generic.

So in our upcoming White Paper, I intend to include proposals that will expand the remit of public service broadcasters, so that it includes a requirement for them to produce 'distinctively British' content.

If it's set in Britain and made in Britain by our public service broadcasters, then it should be distinctively British.

Details will be set out in the White Paper, but it could mean Ofcom issuing genre-specific guidance for PSBs against which to measure their programmes, requirements to use predominantly British talent or greater priority being given to national sporting and cultural 'moments' that bring people together, such as Emma Raducanu's stunning US Open victory.

PSB prominence on digital platforms

Current 'prominence' rules state that the PSBs must be listed in the first five slots in electronic programme guides on TV sets. However these rules do not extend to TV guides and other user interfaces within online TV platforms.

Ministers will update the rules so that PSB content is legally required to be carried across popular online TV platforms including Smart TVs, pay TV services, streaming sticks and set top boxes.

The PSB on-demand services (e.g. BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, All 4 and My5 and regional services like S4C's Clic and STV Player) will also need to be easily findable on platform user interfaces such as homepages.

This will be a significant boost to the future sustainability of public service broadcasting, ensuring UK viewers can continue to access the PSB content they value in years to come on whichever platform they choose to watch it.

Mr Whittingdale said:

I want to ensure British broadcasters get the exposure they deserve – no matter how their content is consumed. Public service broadcasters have been part of our national life for almost a century, and are uniquely placed to reflect our values. It's incredibly important that they keep their place at the heart of television.

That's why we plan to legislate as soon as possible, and make it a legal requirement that major online platforms must carry PSB content, and that they must ensure it's easy to find.

More detail will be set out in the White Paper – building on recommendations from Ofcom – for a principles-based approach to prominence which is proportionate and adaptable for the future. This will likely mean a role for Ofcom to develop guidance and have the necessary enforcement powers.

Dame Carolyn McCall, Chief Executive of ITV, said:

ITV is proud to play a key role as a PSB helping to inform and entertain the whole UK every day on TV and online. > Increasingly, as people watch TV online it's going to be more and more critical that they can easily find content from PSB providers on the online platforms they use, and that commercial PSBs like ITV and Channel 4 are able to make a fair return on that content. This will not be the market outcome in a world of a few global platforms so we welcome the government's decision to update the rules for the online era.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

- The government's [public consultation](#) on a potential change of ownership of Channel 4 closed on Tuesday 14th September. The government is now analysing the responses, and has appointed J.P. Morgan to provide corporate finance advice and analysis to support its consideration of changes to the operating model of Channel 4, including its ownership, its remit and obligations.
- Read the Minister's [speech](#) in full.