



NUJ briefing on proposed merger of Newshour and The World Tonight

March 2019

The BBC is proposing to merge two of its most important radio current affairs programmes, the World Service's Newshour and Radio 4's The World Tonight.

The plan is to have one team producing and one presenter for both programmes who would go straight from Newshour (on air between 20:00 and 22:00) to The World Tonight (TWT), which comes on air at 22:06. NUJ members working on the shows said: "This is madness, unless the idea really is to throw The World Tonight under the bus. It would also do great damage to Newshour."

They added: "All we are asking is that one of the most fundamental and precious public purposes of the BBC, to provide accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming of the highest editorial standards so that all audiences can engage fully with issues across the UK and the world, should not bear the brunt of cuts when money needs to be saved. We are now on the brink of going into dispute over this."

(For full details of the proposals, see end of briefing).

Quality

The NUJ believes such a merger will seriously damage both programmes. It considers it would be impossible for TWT to cover late-breaking domestic news adequately under the proposed arrangement.

Editorially, under the merger proposals, TWT could not provide in-depth coverage of UK news and late-breaking political stories – such as a parliamentary vote on Brexit – because the presenter would already be on air broadcasting Newshour and therefore unavailable to pre-record interviews or be briefed on latest domestic developments.

For example, if a significant royal death were announced between 18:00 when PM comes off air and 22.45pm, the BBC would fail in its commitment to provide dedicated coverage on both R4 and WS because only one news programme presenter was on shift.

TWT is not like rolling news – it tries to provide depth and analysis for its audience. At 10pm audiences expect a more considered programme. It is run by a tiny and dedicated team of journalists who want to continue its tradition of providing a high-quality news programme for an open-minded and engaged audience.

Staffing

The proposed merger:

- would result in the loss of six production jobs and put the remaining staff and presenters under unacceptable and potentially unsafe levels of pressure and stress;
- require one person presenting live, continuously for two hours and 45 minutes back-to-back every night, moving from a World Service programme to a domestic programme within the space of six minutes (during the news bulletin);

The union's presenter members have rejected the idea, saying it is completely unworkable, and more than one has threatened to resign if asked to do it. The idea that one team can make two *good and different* evening news programmes with one presenter back to back is extraordinarily ill conceived and impractical.

The bigger picture

During the negotiations so far management has categorically refused to contemplate cutting any of the much costlier management posts. The NUJ believes this is symptomatic of a wider and damaging policy in the corporation to protect management posts.

It seems that, when money must be saved on daytime programmes, it is the production jobs that go, never the senior editorial staff (news presenters' immediate managers), making the team steadily more top heavy; the current proposals would make this even worse, our members say. We believe this is unacceptable and should be a matter of public concern since it is licence-fee payers who are footing the bill.

The NUJ recognises that cuts may have to be made. We have been working to try to identify alternative ways of saving money, but strongly reject the disproportionately large amount sought and the proposed way of saving it.

We have asked repeatedly why such a large sum is to be cut from this department but have had no response, despite the corporation's new-found and much vaunted commitment to transparency.

MPs and peers may be aware the corporation has recently chosen to spend £10 million on launching BBC Sounds, its podcasts and music app aimed at a younger audience, and given a group of senior managers substantial above-inflation pay rises:

- Gavin Allen, the senior manager, controller of daily news programmes, was given an 11.5 per cent pay rise from £143,500 to £160,000.
- Ken MacQuarrie, director of nations and regions, was given a 30 per cent increase, bringing his pay to £325,000.

Newshour

Newshour is the BBC World Service's flagship radio news programme, on air twice a day, every day. World Service English has a (growing) weekly audience of 79 million listeners around the world, including approximately 15 million in the US who catch WSE via public radio – and Newshour alone is taken by 319 stations with a radio (as opposed to online) audience of more than 3.5 million. The network and the programme also have a significant audience in the UK (a weekly reach of about 1.5 million).

Newshour spearheads the service's reputation and editorial impact around the world, driving the increase in global audience figures. It also earns a significant amount of money for the BBC from its partnerships with re-broadcasters, especially in the US (none of this cash has ever come back to Newshour).

The programme has cachet and influence among opinion-formers in the United States; it broadcasts coast to coast and to key locations, including Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles. Newshour is now heard by many on their way into work in Washington and New York. The reputational impact the programme provides may be incalculable in terms of soft power. Every day, it makes a tangible impact in terms of being *the* voice of the BBC in many countries around the world.

The World Tonight

The World Tonight is a long-standing and respected news and current affairs programme with a loyal audience of around 1.5 million. Almost 20 per cent of the available radio audience at 10pm listens to the World Tonight. The audience grows as it gets later and audience research shows the programme provides a boost to Radio 4's listener figures at 10pm.

The most recent available research, from 2016, showed very high audience satisfaction with the programme. The audience valued its capacity to provide depth on a range of stories and 67 per cent valued the programme's coverage of UK news. The programme is directly linked with the other Radio 4 news and current affairs programmes in the mind of the audience – almost 80 per cent of Radio 4's audience listens to Today and almost half tune in to PM.

The proposed cuts

Jo Floto, editor of The World Tonight and Newshour, announced on October 23, 2018: "We believe these proposals will focus more resources and effort on our journalism. They are

also driven by the need to contribute to the BBC News savings target of £80 million by 2021/22.

“The proposals would require a number of post closures in the production teams and changes to the rota and the way some of you work. We recognise this news is unsettling and will work hard with staff and unions to avoid compulsory redundancies where at all possible. We propose to merge production and presentation for Newshour and The World Tonight. The two programmes already share a great deal of material and interviews, and a number of presenters currently work across both networks.

“Our plan is to create an enlarged evening team, working with a single presenter, to produce both the late Newshour editions and The World Tonight.

“The combined team would bring together the best of our international news expertise and provide a clearer editorial focus for the two programmes. Our proposals include extra evening staff and editorial support to ensure the World Tonight continues to offer a distinctive programme and remains committed to covering UK politics.

“In recognition of the change to staffing, we propose to create four new senior journalist Band D (team manager) roles. In addition, we would set up an original journalism fund, to enhance the commissioning power of both programmes. The merger would mean the reduction of 10 production roles – and one prod/ops position as well as the creation of the new roles mentioned above. We currently have a number of unfilled posts and would hope to make the remaining reductions through voluntary redundancies.

“In the light of these proposed changes, we would then review our presenter requirements, and our senior editorial staffing, after 12 months.”