



Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Championing Excellence and Diversity in Broadcasting

Spring 2024

Bulletin 137

MEDIA BILL GOES TO THE LORDS



The Media Bill passed its final stages in the Commons on January 30th. It aims to update the regulatory framework for Public Service Broadcasting in the UK. With an election looming, the Government and the PSBs are keen that nothing should delay its progress which was speedy in the Commons, having only been introduced in the King's Speech on November 8th. During Commons stages overall it received cross-party support. A series of technical government amendments were passed but none of VLV's recommendations have as yet been adopted. We had significant support from a number of MPs who referred to our work in the House and tabled amendments we welcomed, but none were voted through.

The Bill has now passed to the Lords where it is due to have its second reading on 28 February. VLV has a number of concerns with the Bill which are as follows: the PSB remit has been watered down so that it no longer requires specific genres of content, such as arts and religious content; provisions in the Bill should be clearer to ensure PSB content is easily found online; impartiality regulation should be clarified in the Bill; podcasts should be regulated in the same way as video on demand content to protect audiences from misinformation and harmful content; and digital rights should be included in the Listed Events regime.

We are holding a briefing in the Lords for Peers this month along with the members of the PSM Forum which VLV established with support from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. We have been working closely with the coalition which is formed of other civil society organisations to ensure that citizens' interests are represented in the legislation. We hope that our concerns will resonate with Peers and that we can encourage cross-party support for a number of amendments designed to support the future of the PSBs, but also maintain provision of societally valuable content for the benefit of audiences.

VLV SPRING CONFERENCE AND AWARDS

Wednesday 24 April 2024
10.30am - 4.15pm



VLV will hold its Spring Conference on Wednesday 24th April 2024, at The Geological Society, Piccadilly, London. We hope you will be able to join us.

We will be celebrating all that public service broadcasting provides for audiences in the annual VLV Awards which will be held at lunchtime, hosted by Clive Myrie. Ballot papers for the Awards are included with this Bulletin for members; information about how to vote can also be found on the back page.

Our focus during the conference will be how PSB can be supported by better regulation and legislation, including the Media Bill. We will be running sessions on how to boost the volume of 'at risk' genres, looking at the fate of religious broadcasting in the past two decades, and we will explore the new opportunities for radio audiences to enjoy a wider range of content in the digital age. You can book via the VLV website, by calling the VLV office on 01474 338716 or by emailing info@vlv.org.uk.

NEW VLV PATRONS



We are delighted to announce that Sir Peter Bazalgette, Baroness Jane Bonham Carter and Lord Tom McNally have become VLV Patrons. All three have been long-standing supporters of Public Service Broadcasting and the benefits it brings to citizens in the UK. We are very grateful to them for their support.

Bulletin Spring 2024



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VLV represents citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and champions excellence and diversity in broadcasting. VLV is free from political, sectarian and commercial affiliations. VLV is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulation that underpin the British broadcasting system and in particular to maintain the principles of public service broadcasting.

Views expressed in the bulletin are those of contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the VLV.

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN, COLIN BROWNE



As we head towards a General Election, broadcasting policy issues are probably not at the top of the agenda for most politicians – nor, indeed for the public more widely – given the myriad of challenges faced by policy makers and citizens alike.

However, important decisions continue to be taken. The Media Bill is continuing its Parliamentary journey, having reached the House of Lords relatively unchanged by its passage through the Commons. The final version of the Bill presented to Parliament took some account of the points the VLV had made to the Commons Select Committee. However, we continue to lobby, particularly on the need for sufficient protection for the at-risk genres of societally valuable content.

One of the issues of key concern in the run-up to the Election will be the quality and trustworthiness of information being presented to the electorate. There are real issues concerning the potential for the manipulation of the news using artificial intelligence and other forms of fake news. The dangers of this were graphically illustrated by Baroness Kidron in our annual Jocelyn Hay lecture, which took place in February at Channel 4’s London headquarters. Baroness Kidron stressed that these developments underlined still further the vital role of the public service broadcasters in providing accurate, trustworthy and trusted news and information services.

At a time when the PSBs, and particularly the BBC, will be under intense scrutiny and face sniping from across the political spectrum, it is important for everyone to recognise and respect the service they provide. It is also vital for Ofcom to step up to the mark and ensure that all the licensed broadcasters in the UK provide an impartial and balanced service, not just the PSBs. I urge those of you haven’t already done so to view or read Baroness’s Kidron’s lecture on our website.

The other big challenge all the PSBs face is financial. The commercial PSBs - ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – face a very difficult advertising market, with advertising moving to digital platforms, especially social media. This trend has already forced the broadcasters to make cuts, both in staffing and in on-screen programming.

The BBC, of course, faces arguably the biggest challenge. Having already lost over 30 % of licence fee funding, in real terms, over the last decade or so, the Secretary of State unilaterally lowered the previously agreed settlement for the next two years - see Paddy Barwise’s piece on page 5.

The Government has now commenced its review of BBC funding post 2027 – to the surprise of some of us, who thought they might have decided to kick it into the long, post –Election grass. They have posed a series of questions, to which we will be responding.

The VLV is fortunate to have many great supporters, and I’m very pleased to welcome our three new Patrons - Sir Peter Bazalgette, Baroness Jane Bonham Carter and Lord Tom McNally. Also, I would like to acknowledge our gratitude and thanks to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust who have supported VLV for the past 3 years. They have agreed to continue supporting us for the next 18 months so our work on the Media Bill and BBC funding model can be completed.

Finally, I hope I will see as many of you as possible at our annual Spring Conference and Awards on 24 April. I am very pleased that Clive Myrie, a previous winner, has agreed to be our master of ceremonies for the occasion.

I look forward to seeing you.

Colin Browne,
Chairman of VLV

NEW BBC CHAIRMAN



Photo Credit: Parliamentlive.tv

Chief Executive of Juniper TV and former non-executive Director of the BBC, Dr Samir Shah was announced in December as the Government's preferred candidate to become chairman of the BBC. Following his pre-appointment hearing the CMS Select Committee questioned his ability to 'provide robust challenge to its leadership'. During the hearing they were disappointed by him apparently evading questions about changes to local radio and cuts to *Newsnight*. Dr Shah is due to take up the role at the end of March.

EMPLOYMENT IN TV: BLEAK TIMES

During the past year there has been a 12.5% slump in advertising, the commercial broadcast sector's main source of income, and annual declines are predicted until at least 2028, which is as far as anyone is willing to forecast. As a result all the commercial PSBs are making cuts to budgets and staffing. ITV slashed £10m from its programming budget last year and it is seeking to make £50m of cost savings by 2026. This month it has issued a recruitment freeze and a crackdown on business travel and personal expenses.

Channel 4, which has paused, cancelled and phased the release and commissioning of a number of shows to stretch budgets, faces losses in each of the next two years. The beleaguered broadcaster has said it may look to formally increase its £75m credit facility. C4 is currently in consultation on making 240 roles redundant as it shifts to a digital-first proposition. Sky has also announced it is making 1,000 job cuts.

Separately the publicly-funded BBC is facing financial challenges due to its most recent funding settlement and high inflation. It needs to make £500m extra in savings. In November it announced its latest cuts to services including to its flagship *Newsnight* programme where the number of roles will be cut from 57 to 23 as it reformats into a 30 minute 'interview, debate and discussion show'.

Bectu head Philippa Childs has issued a call to action to the TV industry over the freelancer crisis, stating that urgent collaboration is needed to halt the wave of people leaving the industry. A recent poll of 4,000 Bectu members revealed that 68% of respondents are currently out of work.

NEW HEAD AT CHANNEL 5



Sarah Rose has become the President of Channel 5 UK and regional lead of Paramount in the UK. She replaces Maria Kyriacou who is set to

depart in March. During her tenure Channel 5 has seen gains in peak time viewing with five consecutive years of growth for its free to air portfolio. Ben Frow will continue as chief content officer. Sarah Rose will oversee Channel 5 and the My5 platform in the UK. She will also maintain her commercial oversight of the Paramount pay TV brands in the UK, which she has done in her current role as chief operating and commercial officer for Paramount.

VLV AUTUMN CONFERENCE 2023



VLV held its 40th Autumn Conference on 29th November 2023 in central London. Speakers included Lord Michael Grade, Chair of Ofcom, Dame Elan Closs Stephens, the interim BBC Chair, Chris Morris, CEO of FullFact, Marianna Spring, the BBC's Disinformation Correspondent, Chris Banatvala, former Director of Standards at Ofcom, Lord McNally, Lord Inglewood, Kevin Brennan MP and Professor Catherine Johnson.

At the conference we also held the VLV Awards ceremony for programmes broadcast in 2022. A full report is available on the VLV website where you can also watch videos of the whole day.

SPECTRUM UPDATE

The World Radiocommunications Conference (WRC) was held in December and calls to preserve spectrum for Digital Terrestrial were successful. This means that broadcasting will remain the exclusive primary allocation in the 470-694MHz band until this issue is next debated at WRC in 2031. VLV



has worked closely with the Wider Spectrum Group, a European coalition of organisations representing civil society, along with the PSBs, Everyone TV and the Broadcast 2040+ Campaign.

BARONESS KIDRON: THE JOCELYN HAY LECTURE 2024



We have two jobs. One is to insist that democracy runs technology and not the reverse – that is the job of lawmakers and the electorate. The other is to hold up a mirror to the world. A mirror that builds a collective experience, contributes to a shared reality, speaks of a common truth and reflects our multiple paths... and it could not be more important.

Baroness Beeban Kidron OBE, one of the country's foremost drama and documentary directors, cross-bench Peer and founder of the 5Rights Foundation, delivered the Jocelyn Hay Lecture on Thursday February 8th 2024. The event was chaired by Alex Mahon, CEO of Channel 4.

A video of the lecture and the full text are available on the VLV website at <https://www.vlv.org.uk/recent-events/vlv-jocelyn-hay-lecture-baroness-kidron/>.

We would encourage you to watch the video - Baroness Kidron's insight and understanding of the threats posed by big tech and AI are outstanding. She also said there continues to be a vital role for Public Service Broadcasting in our lives. It binds us together as a population, promoting our common interests, at a time of increasing polarisation and division which is being encouraged by AI and algorithms designed by Big Tech for their commercial gain.

Misinformation is one product of AI, as is material which promotes child sexual abuse, but fears that many will be left without a job and 'robot weapons would decide who was the enemy' are equally worrying. She points out that those who introduced ChatGPT to the world have warned that the 'new decision making models [are] on course to bring down society as we know it'.

She went on to say that governments have a role to play by ensuring that our common interests are protected against the threats of AI. She regrets that 'technology that could contribute so much to human flourishing, is so often cannibalised by those who seek vast profit and even vaster power'. She warned that during an election year 'it is dangerous to have an information environment in which the synthetic passes for truth unchallenged – not only because those that are wrongfully accused will suffer - but because **those who believe will suffer**'.

She ended by saying that 'technology is not a replacement for human decision making. It is a brilliant powerful tool for crunching information... It can capture the truth of an injustice on our smartphone, and it can create a lie that is unjustly popularised on our smartphone' and that we should control technology, not the reverse – for the common good.

VLV ANALYSIS: BBC FUNDING CUT BY 34% IN REAL TERMS SINCE 2010

VLV's latest research shows that public funding for BBC services for UK audiences declined by 34% in real terms between 2010 and 2023, while production costs have risen considerably.

In 2022-2023 BBC public funding was £3.84bn; in 2010 it was £3.95bn. When this income is adjusted according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator the reduction in public funding is 34%

Under such financial pressure VLV is concerned that the BBC is unlikely to be able to continue to maintain the range and quality of existing services for UK audiences. Instead it will have to focus on providing content which is more commercially attractive to broadcasters around the world.

VLV will be publishing a full report on its analysis in due course.

BBC MID-TERM REVIEW

The Government published the recommendations of its Mid-Term Review of the BBC in January. Following the last Charter Review, new BBC governance and regulatory arrangements were established: responsibility for ensuring the BBC delivers on its Mission passed to a new unitary Board and regulation passed to Ofcom. Given the extent of these changes, the Charter provided for the Government to conduct a Mid-Term Review by 2024.

The recommendations include measures to grow public trust and improve BBC impartiality and complaints handling. Although there was limited evidence in the Review that the BBC is failing to be impartial, the Government has firmly set this as its focus in its summary, citing 'audience perception' that the BBC is not sufficiently impartial as an issue.

While the Review found the new governance arrangements appear to be working adequately, it makes recommendations to ensure that the Board has the full confidence of BBC staff and the Board will now have a legally binding responsibility to oversee the complaints process.

The Review found that the BBC's transparency has improved during this Charter but it wants to see better communication with audiences.

BBC FUNDING MODEL REVIEW

The DCMS launched a Review into the BBC funding model in December 2023 with the publication of terms of reference. The Government is concerned that the current licence fee funding model is unsustainable because of the amount of choice in the market.

The Review will explore whether the BBC should provide services to audiences on a fully commercial basis, ie subscription services, which VLV strongly opposes because it will undermine the universality of the BBC, a fundamental characteristic of the service.

The Review will be internal, rather than involving a public consultation, drawing on the views of key stakeholders. VLV will be sending in a submission focused on the citizen interests in a model which is universal and supports free to air provision.

BBC FUNDING 2024-25 LOWER THAN EXPECTED

By Professor Patrick Barwise



In January 2022, the DCMS and Nadine Dorries announced a six-year BBC funding settlement under which the TV licence fee would be frozen at £159/year for two years, from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2024, before rising with inflation for four years from 1 April 2024 until 31 March 2028. With annual inflation running at 8%-plus, this announcement meant the BBC's real-terms public funding – already down 30% since 2010 - would be further reduced by the end of March 2024, but would then remain broadly flat.

In December 2023, Lucy Frazer reneged on Dorries', already tough January 2022 settlement, announcing, with less than four months' notice, that the licence fee would increase by only £10.50 (6.6%) to £169.50 for the year 2024-5, based on the latest (September 2023) CPI inflation rate.

The expectation, based on the January 2022 settlement, had been that it would increase by 9%, the average rate of inflation over the previous year, an increase of £14.30/year to £173.30. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was reportedly 'set to block' a 9% increase, saying 'It's really important that when things are difficult everyone is doing what they can to ease the cost of living for families'.

By reneging on the January 2022 settlement, Sunak and Frazer will save each household £3.80 (£14.30 minus £10.50) over the 2024-5 year. That's 7.3p/week.

A bag of Cadbury's Dairy Milk Giant Buttons costs £1.50 at Tesco's and contains about 45 chocolate buttons. The unit cost is therefore 3.33p per button.

The saving per household over the next year, compared with what they would have been paying if the Government had honoured the January 2022 settlement, is therefore enough to buy just under two-and-a-quarter chocolate buttons a week (7.3/3.33 equals 2.2) – that's one chocolate button per person per week for the average household. Of course, the saving to households with free TV licences will be zero.

Announcing the reduced increase in December, Lucy Frazer told the House of Commons the lower settlement would 'save individual licence fee payers over £37 by the end of 2024'. It is unclear how she or her advisers calculated this. The correct figure is about £2.85 (three-quarters of the £3.80 annual saving).

Professor Patrick Barwise is Emeritus Professor of Management and Marketing at the London Business School and co-author of The War Against the BBC

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

VLV's focus in recent months has been on the Media Bill, but we have also responded to a number of other consultations. All VLV's submissions can be found on its website at <https://www.vlv.org.uk/issues-policies/vlv-consultation-responses/>.

TV Distribution: Ofcom ran a consultation on the future of TV Distribution late in 2023 to feed into the Government's deliberations of how best to ensure audiences have access to high quality UK content in years' to come. The debate focuses on whether Digital Terrestrial TV (DTT) should be replaced by Internet Protocol TV (IPTV). VLV considers that IPTV is not resilient enough yet to be able to guarantee the same level of service as DTT. It is vulnerable to cyber attacks and not universally available without broadband - 7% of households in the UK do not have broadband.

Community Radio Licensing: The community radio sector is a growing and vibrant sector, which VLV welcomes because it brings benefits to citizens across the UK. However, there are concerns there is a lack of opportunity for new stations to apply for FM licences. In our response to this DCMS consultation we recommend the Government ensures that there is greater access for new entrants to the sector so that the diversity of stations is maintained and innovation is encouraged.

Future of News: In response to this inquiry into the future of news in the UK by the Lords Digital and Communications Committee VLV suggests the Media Bill could improve the regulation of impartiality on TV and radio.

VLV considers that a healthy news ecosystem is essential to democracy. We are concerned by the decline in public trust of the media and urge the Committee to explore how this can be reversed through better regulation. We believe that current legislation does not provide clear enough definitions of which content should be impartial. Ofcom guidance on active politicians presenting programmes on news channels should also be reviewed, along with other elements of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code and Guidance.

Channel 4 Relicensing: The Channel 4 licence is due to expire on December 31st 2024. As part of the process to renew the licence the Channel 4 Corporation (C4C) has requested changes to some of its licence obligations. While C4C's is broadly delivering well against its remit and duties, managing the transition from being primarily a linear broadcaster to one which is digital, delivering content online and via its on demand platform, requires some changes in approach.

VLV agrees with all the conditions proposed by Ofcom for the new Channel 4 licence, including that it should be renewed for a 10 year period. In an ideal world we would prefer that some quotas were increased to ensure greater value for audiences, in regional representation, for example, but we recognise that the economic environment for broadcasting is likely to remain uncertain for the coming 10 years and increased quotas could undermine C4C's sustainability.

GB NEWS - A CHALLENGE FOR DEMOCRACY?

By Bob Usherwood



Photo Credit: GB News

I expect like many members I only watch GB News or Talk TV to see how often they stray from providing the kind of broadcasting that VLV supports.

Few appear to have heard of Talk TV. It has poor viewing figures with some programmes registering zero audience and journalists predicting its closure following Piers Morgan's departure. GB News has a much larger audience. Nigel Farage, one of its numerous right wing presenters, claimed last September: 'A massive day for British broadcasting and for GB News [when] for the first time ever [it] beat Sky News, BBC News and Talk TV for the whole day'. It has come a long way since those of us interested in such projects laughed at the problems that turned its launch into a joke.

Stuart McGurk in an article looking at its history quotes a GB News producer who said those early days were a 'first glimpse...of an ideological divide that would widen into a chasm – between "the more establishment broadcasting people and the fire-breathing libertarian right-wingers"'. He was talking about divisions in the management, but today there is an ideological divide between GB News, Talk TV and established broadcasters, such as the BBC, ITV, Channel Four and Sky News.

That divide is also evident in our newspapers with the majority of titles having a right wing bias. This is, and should be, a concern, but research undertaken by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism shows that 'The British election is fought first and foremost on our screens'. The same project also reported that 'most UK residents have at least some individual news brands they trust and most people across the political spectrum regard the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, and local media as trustworthy'.

YouGov recently found that just 12% of respondents ranked GB News as a trusted news-brand, compared to the BBC's 44%. However, the Conservative Home Web page reports that 'Over half of...Conservative Party members now watch GB News'. It also reveals that 'GB News, in political terms, has settled somewhere to the left of Reform UK (Richard Tice is a presenter) but well to the right of, say, the Conservative Parliamentary Party's centre of gravity'. It would be interesting to learn how Ofcom views this, given its rule on 'Due Impartiality'.

GB News now claims to be Britain's Election Channel. and has just broadcast a People's Forum featuring the Prime Minister. This programme, which received around 500 complaints and is being investigated by Ofcom, would, promised the station, 'kick-off a series of special broadcasts ... as the clock ticks down to the General Election'. Given the importance of screens, one must ask what impact this will have on the way Britons vote? No doubt British academics are, or will be, looking at this but American research reveals that 'partisan media is not simply a challenge for the opposing party—it may present a challenge for democracy' (Broockman and Kalla 2024).

Various American projects have suggested that Fox News shapes how its viewers see the world and reveal that it is a powerful force in Republican politics. Recently In Britain, talking about GB News, Priti Patel told the Tory Party Conference that the 'country needed a new disruptor when it came to the broadcast media to take on the establishment: the Tory-hating, Brexit-bashing, free-speech deniers at the BBC and the so-called mainstream media'. And Andrew Marr quotes an unnamed 'veteran Conservative politician' in the *New Statesman* as saying 'we have never seen a right-wing media so powerful...[after the election] it will attempt to control the leadership battle and militate in favour of the lunatics – Braverman, Badenoch and the younger ones'.

American research has also found that Fox News promoted culture wars which divide the country. *The New York Times* observed that 'Night after night, the host of the most-watched show...uses a simple narrative to instil fear in his viewers'. Many see such divisions as anti-democratic. Fox, almost exclusively, uses conservative commentators, which research suggests 'could influence how Americans vote, perhaps even tipping elections'.

Yurukoglu and Martin developed a model that estimated how effective Fox is at persuading viewers to vote its way. This revealed that 'if Fox News hadn't existed, the Republican presidential candidate's share of the two-party vote would have been 3.59 points lower in 2004 and 6.34 points lower in 2008'. There is some uncertainty about such estimates, but Yurukoglu states that 'even if the effect were half as large as estimated, that'd still mean that Fox News is having a very real, sizable effect on elections'.

GB News has clearly copied the American station and, especially in an Election year, could threaten our democracy. It is not the channel that Andrew Neil envisaged. Indeed, when resigning, he confirmed that he did not want to be a part of a 'British Fox News'. Given the American research we can see why questions remain regarding its adherence to Ofcom regulations and the rules of British broadcasting, but these will have to be considered another time.

Bob Usherwood is a VLV Trustee and Emeritus Professor at The University of Sheffield

FAREWELL TO LONG WAVE

By Anthony Wills



Photo Credit: Cam 3 at The Valve Museum

The BBC has announced that its Long Wave (LW) radio transmissions will cease on 31st March this year, as the equipment is in need of replacement but parts are no longer manufactured. Indeed *The Guardian* reported last year that the transmitter relies on a pair of glass valves of which only ten are left in the entire world!

The main LW transmitter was erected at Borough Hill, just outside Daventry (Northants), in 1925 and replaced by Droitwich ten years later. As the term Long Wave implies, the signals can travel long distances, even extending to Italy and Sweden, and during the Second World War coded messages, read out during normal programmes, were sent to the French Resistance using the transmitter. The signal can be clearly picked up on portable radios simply by rotating them in the right direction (they have an internal aerial). Medium Wave still exists though it is now known as AM, and some commercial radio stations offer separate AM and FM services, but Short Wave (extensively used for BBC World Service transmissions) has been superseded by the internet. At present it is still possible, if you are so inclined, to buy a Long Wave/Medium Wave only radio.

FM (Frequency Modulation) transmissions on the BBC began in 1955 and require an extendable aerial; to give one example, BBC Radio 2 (when it was called the Light Programme) went out on Long Wave (1500m), but when Radio 1 came along in 1967, the two stations shared a single FM frequency. When I was producing the late night Radio 2 Arts Programme, *Round Midnight*, hosted by Brian Matthew, in the 1980s we had to wait until John Peel finished his Radio 1 show at 12.00am before we got the FM wavelength back. BBC Local Radio, on the other hand, has from its inception (also in 1967) been solely transmitted on FM.

Long Wave, Medium Wave and FM services are known as analogue. The BBC currently uses LW for certain Radio 4 programmes, such as *The Daily Service* (which has been on air since 1928), *Yesterday In Parliament* and ball-by-ball Test Match commentaries (which are also often broadcast on Radio 5 Live or Sports Extra): these will be moved to Radio 4 Extra (a digital only station) from 1st April this year. *The Shipping Forecast* is a special case: it will be broadcast twice a day on Radio 4 on weekdays and three times a day on weekends. It will also continue to be on HM Coastguard's channels.

But unless you want to catch up on a programme you missed, or listen to it again on BBC Sounds, you don't need a computer: a DAB Digital Radio can be purchased for as little as £20, though even that service could be replaced by 2030. And what about the so-called Smart Speaker (Alexa), which you may be surprised to learn has been around for nearly ten years? That had better wait for a future article...

Anthony Wills is a former BBC Radio 2 producer and now a VLV Trustee

UK INDIGENOUS MINORITY LANGUAGE TELEVISION: A NATIONAL TREASURE

By Donald Campbell

On Sunday 2nd December 1923, the Rev John Bain gave a religious address in Gaelic on the BBC's Home Service – the first time Gaelic had ever been heard on the airwaves.

We don't know exactly how many were listening, but in the previous momentous decade, the number of Gaelic-only speakers in Scotland fell by 46 per cent, with World War One and emigration thought to be key drivers in the unprecedented loss of monoglot Gaelic speakers.

Fast forward 100 years to the present day and to BBC ALBA, the Gaelic television service, which the BBC runs in partnership with the Gaelic Media Service, or MG ALBA as it is better known.

With weekly reach of around 300,000 on television and up to 1 million when short-form digital viewing is included, this service has, by any measure, been a success with viewers and a much-valued shot in the arm for the creative industries in Scotland.

This is all the more astonishing when the number of speakers of Gaelic – all of them now bilingual – has, according to census data, fallen from almost 160,000 in 1921 to less than 60,000 now.

Smaller languages everywhere are in peril of digital extinction as the gap between their resources and those available to the large majority languages such as English and Spanish continues to grow.

Here, in 2024, it is to the credit of the UK that the Media Bill proposes that Ofcom must, in its review of PSB, determine whether there has been a "sufficient quantity" of audiovisual content in, or mainly in, the Welsh, Gaelic, Irish, Scots, Ulster Scots and Cornish languages.

Nevertheless, except for the case of Welsh, which has a recognised PSB service in the form of S4C, there is no yardstick or benchmark by which Ofcom can measure a "sufficient quantity".

Sufficient for what? To save a language? To operate a PSB service?

MG ALBA would settle for the latter.

Perhaps because of its unique partnership model, BBC ALBA has fallen between too many stools. Gaelic television may not command the same resources as Welsh - but Parliament has the opportunity now, through the Media Bill, to show parity of esteem in statute and ensure that funding is sufficient to deliver a PSB remit in Gaelic.

Rev John Bain and those who laboured then and since for the cause of Gaelic television would, no doubt, be proud of what they started. Let's ensure that their legacy is enshrined in the written will of Parliament so that Gaelic broadcasting is secured for future generations.

Donald Campbell is CEO of MG ALBA

VLV 2023 AGM

The VLV AGM was held at the Geological Society, Piccadilly, on 29 November 2023. 36 members attended, most in person, some remotely.

The VLV Annual Report and Accounts for year ending 31 May 2023 were reviewed and approved. Colin Browne, Mary Dixon and Peter Gordon were re-appointed for a further year as Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. Allan Jack and Professor Bob Usherwood were elected as Trustees and Professor Sylvia Harvey re-elected for a second three-year term. Professors Sarita Malik and Maria Michalis stood down after serving, respectively, four years and two three-year terms.

After the formal business the meeting discussed the work of the VLV, its financial position and current media issues.

THE VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING - VOTE NOW!

Enclosed with this bulletin are **ballot papers for the VLV Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting** for VLV members, covering programmes broadcast during 2023.

The ceremony will be held at the Geological Society's rooms at Burlington House, London, on Wednesday, 24th April 2024; we hope you will join us at this celebration.

The VLV Awards are an opportunity to celebrate the wealth of excellent programmes broadcast during 2023, across all channels and networks; this quality and diversity is reflected in the range of nominations made by VLV members.

Winners particularly value these awards, first introduced some 30 years ago, because they are chosen by the people who really matter, their listeners and viewers.

Please take a few minutes to vote for those programmes and individuals you particularly appreciated during 2022.

You have until Friday 15th March 2024 to return your completed ballot papers, either by post: The Old Rectory Business Centre, Springhead Road, Northfleet, Kent, DA11 8HN, or email: info@vlv.org.uk

Diary Dates

VLV's 41st Spring Conference

**Wednesday 24th April 2023
10.30am-16.15pm**

Geological Society/Online

We will announce the dates of other events during the coming months.

Please watch out for our email updates and visit the VLV website www.vlv.org.uk for further details.

Keeping up to date

VLV sends out regular updates by email - please ensure that Sarah in the VLV office info@vlv.org.uk has your up to date email address.

You can keep up to date with all the latest VLV news at www.vlv.org.uk



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VLV Subscription - Individual £30 Joint (two at same address) £45 Student e-membership £10

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