

## **The challenges and opportunities for rural journalism in public broadcasting: A case study of the ABC and BBC**

### **Background and context:**

As the executive producer of the ABC's Queensland Country Hour, I lead a team of nine rural reporters and two presenters to broadcast a daily radio program focused on rural current affairs. I also provide editorial leadership across a range of platforms and promote rural stories to other divisions within the ABC, with the aim of increasing audiences for rural content, particularly online and on networked television.

Rural journalism has evolved in recent years at the ABC, as the Rural division was disbanded and brought under the new Regional division. The BBC has also undergone considerable change, with rural programmes consolidated within a Rural Affairs Unit in Bristol. These changes have presented both challenges (the need to maintain specialist rural journalism skills and knowledge) and opportunities (new platforms and audiences for rural content).

I was awarded a bursary from the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists to travel to the UK to gain insights into how the BBC, as a fellow public broadcaster, covered rural news and current affairs. I wanted to understand how to build audiences for specialist rural stories. Was it possible to produce rural content that would connect with urban audiences, while still meeting the needs of rural audiences? In learning about rural output at the BBC, I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect on the rural content we produce at the ABC.

I spent a week working with the BBC Rural Affairs Unit in Bristol in early March 2020, shadowing the flagship Radio 4 programme Farming Today and BBC 1's Countryfile. I met one-on-one with rural journalists from both programmes, as well as Radio 4's Costing the Earth and the Food Programme. Head of Rural Affairs, Dimitri Houtart was particularly helpful to me, as was journalist Anne-Marie Bullock, who worked between the news division and the rural programmes at Radio 4. Anne-Marie had undertaken an exchange at the ABC several years ago and shared my motivation to protect and progress specialist rural journalism in a public broadcasting context.

### **Rural coverage at the ABC**

The ABC's flagship radio programme is the Country Hour; seven state-based weekday radio programmes. Established in 1945, the Country Hour is Australia's longest running radio programme and is aimed at people with an interest or involvement in rural affairs, primary industries and resources, as well as people living in the state's rural and regional areas. The content is niche in nature but intended to be accessible to a broad regional audience and, with several exceptions, is not available on analogue to metropolitan audiences.

Across Australia, 55 specialist rural reporters and presenters produce the Country Hour programmes and file to multiple other platforms. Rural reporters were early adopters of digital platforms and are increasingly filing to state and national television news programmes. On television, the ABC's main vehicle for current affairs coverage of regional and rural issues is Landline. The ABC also employs a small team of national rural and regional reporters, working under a national editor.

## **Rural coverage at the BBC**

The BBC has two programmes dedicated to rural output, both based in Bristol but within separate divisions; BBC 1's Countryfile and Farming Today, which is broadcast on Radio 4. In addition, The Archers, a long running radio drama used as a vehicle to convey rural issues and views, continues to be a popular reflection of rural life, and has remained based in Birmingham. Both Countryfile and Farming Today attract large audiences, the former averaging around eight million viewers in its Sunday night primetime slot and the latter averaging one million listeners a day.

Countryfile sits within the Factual & Entertainment division and has a relatively large staff and several contracted presenters. A small number of staff produce Farming Today within the Rural Affairs unit, rotating through producing and reporting shifts. When I was in Bristol, the program had a single producer for the week, with a presenter based off-site and another reporter working in the field. The programme also makes use of country correspondents; freelancers who produce packages from the field, usually under commission. I was told it had recently been the practice to broadcast the longer, Saturday programme from the field but this had been cut due to budget pressures. This has had the effect of limiting the opportunities for presenters and reporters to work in the field.

The BBC also employs several regionally based, specialist Rural Affairs (and Environment) Correspondents, who work within the News division. However, as these positions were located outside of Bristol, it was not clear to what extent they worked with other rural programmes at the BBC. I did spend time with reporter Anne-Marie Bullock who works across BBC News and Rural Affairs. She told me that she works hard to promote rural stories and to ensure other correspondents are including rural angles in general stories, such as health and education. Anne-Marie is not employed to promote rural perspectives, she does it due to her personal passion and interest for rural journalism.

## **Impartiality Review**

Prior to arriving in Bristol, my understanding of the BBC's rural output had been heavily informed by my reading of the BBC Trust's Impartiality Review into BBC coverage of rural areas in the UK (2014). This review led to some significant changes to the BBC's rural output, including the appointment of Dimitri Houtart at Rural Affairs Champion for the BBC. Based in Bristol, Dimitri leads the Rural Affairs Unit but also serves as a rural/farming advisor across all BBC output, including programmes such as David Attenborough's Climate Change – The Facts.

The impartiality review, authored by Heather Hancock, concluded that rural news items originating in the English regions were too rarely perceived as significant enough to travel to network news programmes. It found audiences felt network news coverage of rural issues focused too often on protest and controversy rather than on underlying issues. The report also found that rural audiences across the UK felt that the BBC had a metropolitan bias. Finally, it concluded 'the more expert the journalist on rural affairs, or the closer he or she is geographically or by background to the story, the more accurate and balanced is the coverage'.

## **Farming Today**

I arrived at BBC Bristol and began my first day in an editorial meeting for Farming Today, a long running programme broadcast nationally at 5:45am each weekday morning and as an

extended program on Saturday mornings. The Farming Today editorial meeting felt very familiar to me as it was not unlike the daily editorial meetings of the Queensland Country Hour.

The entire rural editorial team meets each morning to go over audience feedback from the previous day's programme, consider holder stories and then look ahead at the programme diary and discuss angles for the day ahead. The rostered producer then begins making calls and chasing a lead story. Each programme is pre-recorded in the afternoon and broadcast in a 13-minute time slot the following morning. The stories were not unlike those we would cover in Australia, and ranged from trade deals, to food traceability, animal welfare, and pests and disease.

However, a fundamental difference between rural output at the ABC and that of the BBC became clear when I sat down with Head of Rural Affairs Dimitri Houtart towards the end of my first day. He told me that the BBC did not make programmes for rural audiences, rather, it made specialist rural programmes for a general audience and he was very clear and unapologetic about that objective. As Head of Rural Affairs, Dimitri has oversight of the Farming Today programme, as well as the Radio 4 programmes Costing the Earth and the Food Programme. Reporters tend to work across all three programmes on a rostered basis and both Costing the Earth and the Food Programme tell stories about the environment and food production in a way that is accessible to non-rural audiences.

Like the Country Hour, Farming Today explores issues of concern to farmers and others interested in rural affairs. However, it does not broadcast livestock markets or pure agronomy stories and ensures that all stories are accessible to a non-rural audience. This consumer focus was very evident in the stories that were covered during my week at the programme; for instance, 'are white eggs more 'animal friendly' than brown eggs?' and 'UK consumers and farmers reject chlorinated chicken from the US under post-Brexit trade deals'.

## **Countryfile**

In 2009, Countryfile moved to a primetime Sunday evening timeslot and at its peak has around ten million viewers each week. Around this time, the programme employed 'farmer Adam' following a public search for a new presenter. Adam Henson farms in the Cotswolds and his segment is designed to give viewers an insight into the challenges of running a working farm. Like the ABC's Landline program, Countryfile has a roughly 50/50 audience split between urban and rural/regional viewers.

It was explained to me that the show is deliberately pitched at an urban audience. This has caused controversy at times, and there are farmers who refer to it as 'Townyfile' and believe it should be more rural focused. The programme's editors defended its urban appeal, telling me that it would never attract the audience it does in a primetime slot if it were too focused on rural perspectives and hyper-rural issues. This focus is communicated to rural lobby groups as a positive; farmers ultimately benefit from urban viewers' increased understanding of life in the countryside.

Countryfile has a magazine and a social media presence and, when I was in Bristol, there were moves underway to further digitise content as part of a programme refresh. The programme has very high production values and its presenters enjoy a high profile. It includes an investigation each week – for instance, trade negotiations and food traceability - but for the most part aims to be light viewing on a Sunday evening.

## **Coverage of Environment**

I observed a strong overlap between rural and environment content, with the programme Costing the Earth produced by some of the same reporters who also work on Farming Today and Countryfile. Costing the Earth is a Radio 4 programme that delivers solutions-based journalism by covering environmental problems and the practical ways that humans can respond to them.

In Australia, climate change can still be a controversial topic, particularly in rural communities, and I put this to a senior producer at Costing the Earth, asking whether the programme was well received among farmers and farming groups. I was surprised to hear that the programme had been running for 13 years and that it had been at least a decade since climate science had been a topic of serious debate in the UK.

## **Conclusions**

The popularity of the BBC's rural programmes Farming Today and Countryfile in primetime slots is strong evidence of the interest that urban audiences have in rural issues. The BBC's rationale for deliberately pitching rural programmes to urban audiences – that rural people benefit when people in urban areas understand the issues that concern them – is a sound one. However, it remains a challenge to provide specialist rural content that is both accessible and rigorous. Budget pressures that result in fewer opportunities for reporters to work in and broadcast from the field could potentially weaken Farming Today's existing strong links with rural communities in the UK.

My time at the BBC made me realise how fortunate the ABC was to have a large team of specialist rural reporters, spread across the country. Of course, this in part reflects the importance of agriculture to the Australian economy and the diversity of agricultural production. However, it is clear the Country Hour programmes provide localised (state based) specialist rural programming that is quite unique and unlike anything offered by the BBC. The Country Hour's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year offers the opportunity to reflect on the programme's purpose and to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of rural audiences - even as agricultural production and the information available to farmers changes – while working to attract new audiences and reflect growing interest in food and fibre.

Beyond the Country Hour, there are now many opportunities for rural reporters to provide specialist reporting on issues of interest to urban audiences in a way that is both rigorous and accessible, and these opportunities should be embraced. ABC Rural has a strong track record of being an early adopter of new platforms and this should continue. Furthermore, rural reporters should be encouraged to think of themselves as specialist rural storytellers, rather than radio journalists who sometimes report for online and television. The emphasis should be on how to tell each story using the most appropriate medium to reach the biggest possible audience.

It is often the case that when a networked ABC television programme reports on a major rural issue, it had already been covered comprehensively by rural reporters for rural audiences. We need to find a way to bridge this gap. How can rural reporters champion stories of significance in their 'patch' and pitch them to national programmes? Likewise, how can rural journalists champion rural perspectives to ensure they are included in general stories (such as education and health). Programmes such as News Breakfast and the ABC's

24-hour news channels offer opportunities for rural reporters to tell rural stories, both to reflect their communities and to educate urban audiences about what matters in rural Australia.

ABC Rural can also do more when it comes to reporting on environmental issues and climate change. While views in rural communities vary, Australian farmers are increasingly motivated by environmental sustainability. Climate change is a significant challenge that is recognised by major farming groups, including the National Farmers Federation and Meat and Livestock Australia, and rural Australians are highly exposed to the consequences of a changing climate. Rural reporters should feel emboldened to cover issues around climate change and not leave these big issues to networked programmes.

The BBC impartiality review found that network news coverage of rural issues focused too often on protest and controversy rather than underlying issues. The advantage enjoyed by the ABC, in having a team of rural reporters based in rural and regional areas, is that specialist rural reporters can provide important context and nuance to major issues that so often polarise audiences. The impartiality review also found that 'the more expert the journalist on rural affairs, or the closer he or she is geographically or by background to the story, the more accurate and balanced is the coverage'. The ABC enjoys the incredible advantage of having a team of journalists who are both specialists in rural affairs and geographically based in rural and regional areas. These are strengths to be preserved.

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