

BBC News and Current Affairs review

Response of the UK Metric Association to the BBC Trust's consultation

Purpose and status of document

This document gives the response of the UK Metric Association (UKMA) to the invitation by the BBC Trust to participate in the consultation on the Corporation's news and current affairs output that is broadcast or available to the whole of the UK.

UKMA is an independent, non-party political, single issue organisation that advocates the full adoption of the international metric system ("Système International" - SI) for all official, trade, legal, contractual and other purposes in the United Kingdom as soon as practicable. UKMA is financed entirely by membership subscriptions and personal donations.

This response was approved by the Committee of the Association at its meeting on 20 November 2013.

Summary

In accordance with its mission to "inform, educate and entertain" the BBC should acknowledge its responsibility to support and not undermine the National Measurement System, which is exclusively metric. It should adopt a policy of making metric (SI) units the primary, default system in all television, radio and online output, and this policy should be monitored and enforced. The relevant sections of the BBC's style guide should be rewritten accordingly.

Introduction

UKMA's response to the consultation is limited to commenting on one single - but crucially important - aspect of the BBC's output. We refer to the BBC's apparent lack of a coherent policy on the use of measurement units - or, alternatively, to the failure of BBC management to enforce any policy on measurement units that they may have.

The importance of measurement

The importance to the nation of a single, verifiable system of measurement is clearly explained in the publication "Measurement matters" by the Government's National Measurement Office¹.

An extract from this document is quoted below:

"Measurement underpins the welfare of a modern society and touches almost every part of daily life:

- Ensuring the safety and effectiveness of healthcare diagnostics and treatments
- Measuring the composition, energy value and quantity of gas piped to our homes, or of fuel in our vehicles
- Ensuring safe operation of aircraft in flight
- Ensuring consistency of international time standards so we can communicate reliably and navigate accurately throughout the world
- Quantifying emissions of greenhouse gases to understand and mitigate climate change
- Ensuring the security and sustainability of our food supply
- Ensuring fairness between buyers and sellers in markets where goods are sold by weight or volume."

The National Measurement System is exclusively metric.

Two incompatible systems of measurement

However, the UK is in the unfortunate position of having effectively two incompatible systems² of measurement in widespread use. Under the UK's Units of Measurement Regulations 1986 (SI 1986/1082, as amended) the official, legal system for most purposes (except road traffic signs, draught beer and cider and doorstep milk) is the International System of Units ("SI") commonly known as the metric system. However, a range of unofficial measurement units, such as stones, gallons, acres and degrees Fahrenheit (known as "imperial" units), persists in popular usage and in the media - including in the output of the BBC.

¹ See <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/nmo/docs/nms/measurement-matters.pdf>.

² Strictly speaking, imperial units do not constitute a "system", but the term is here used loosely

The result of this mixture of measurement systems is mutual incomprehension, conversion errors, wasted educational time in attempting to learn two systems, additional costs, mistakes and accidents. The continued existence of two systems therefore conflicts with the important national objective of a single, verifiable system of measurement used and understood by everybody.

Role of the media

There is believed to be a number of reasons for the continued use of imperial units. These include habit, tradition, unfamiliarity with metric units and a mistaken belief that metric units are somehow "foreign" and unBritish. However, it is contended that possibly the most important reason is the widespread use of imperial units in the media - including newspapers and magazines, radio and television and the internet. People naturally remember and repeat whichever measurement units they have seen or heard in the media and the use of those units is thereby reinforced and prolonged.

Current practice in the BBC's news and current affairs output

The usage of measurement units in the BBC's news and current affairs output is inconsistent and undisciplined and does not appear to reflect any considered policy on the matter.

Some broadcast news reports and current affairs programmes are entirely metric, some are entirely imperial, and some mix the two systems in the same news item. Others attempt approximate (or sometimes spuriously precise) conversions between metric and imperial. Little or no regard appears to be had to the needs of the target audience.

A similar pattern may be observed on BBC Online, where the problem is compounded by incorrect use of metric symbols - even in scientific news stories³.

Role of the BBC

As the national broadcasting organisation of the UK, the BBC is independent of government and politics. Nevertheless, the Corporation has a responsibility to uphold and not undermine important national objectives. UKMA contends that this role should extend to supporting the National Measurement System.

The BBC's mission is to "inform, educate and entertain", and its "public purposes", as set out in Article 4 of its Royal Charter, include "promoting education and learning".

Although children are taught primarily in metric units in maths and science, if this teaching is to be effective, it needs to be reinforced outside the classroom by daily practice in the use of these units. Unfortunately, however, because of the

³ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24175773>

prevalence of imperial units in the media and elsewhere, children's learning - far from being reinforced - is actually undermined by the media.

Spokespersons for the BBC have defended the practice of using both metric and imperial units on the grounds that the BBC has to operate in a society where both systems are in widespread use. Therefore, it is claimed, the BBC must "try to provide content, whether on TV, Radio or Online, which is accessible and understandable to our audiences.....We also have a responsibility to show British society as it is⁴."

UKMA rejects this argument. Not all aspects of British society are admirable: it surely would not be claimed that since a significant proportion of viewers, listeners and readers cannot spell correctly, the BBC's output should condone spelling mistakes. On the contrary, the BBC tries to set a good example. Moreover, the argument is self-perpetuating and circular:

- a. "Society uses both systems
- b. The BBC must reflect society
- c. Therefore the BBC must use both systems
- d. BBC audiences experience both systems in BBC output
- e. People repeat and copy what they have experienced in BBC output
- f. Therefore society uses both systems
- g. etc ... ad infinitum"

The argument that some of the BBC's audience cannot understand metric units is also unsustainable. The metric system is used throughout the world and is easy for persons of all ages and abilities to learn and understand. When people say that they do not "understand" metric units, what they usually mean (assuming they are not feigning this inability) is that they are not *familiar* with them. Quite obviously, the only way to become familiar with metric units is to use them and be exposed to them - including in the media. The prolongation of the use of imperial units in the media (including the BBC) thus insulates audiences from the need to use and become familiar with metric units.

If the BBC takes seriously its mission to "educate" it should stop undermining the education of the nation's children (and adults) by prolonging the use of obsolete units of measurement. It should break the vicious circle described above, and its editors, journalists and presenters should cease using imperial units as the primary or default units of measurement.

Recommended policy

1. Metric units as the default system

It is recommended that the BBC should adopt the International System of Units (SI), also known as the metric system, as the primary and default system of measurement units to be used in the BBC's news and current affairs output that is broadcast to the whole of the UK in television, radio or online. (Although it is outside the scope of this consultation, the same considerations apply to regional broadcasts and to

⁴ Letter from former Deputy Director-General to the Chairman of UKMA, 5 August 2005 (appended)

documentary, magazine, sports and scientific programmes. It would be best if the BBC adopted a consistent policy across the whole of its output - subject to the exceptions listed below).

It is acknowledged that there may need to be limited exceptions to the above policy. These are:

- a) When quoting original material from a foreign (typically, American) news source.
- b) When featuring historic material
- c) When featuring "vox pop" interviews with private individuals

In all these cases, where imperial units are used, conversions to metric units should be given at first mention (but not throughout the item).

2. The use of metric symbols

In written material (whether online or on television screen) the correct metric symbols should be used in the correct manner as prescribed by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM) in the latest edition of their brochure⁵.

3. Style guide

The Section of the BBC's style guide headed "Weights and measures" ⁶ actually contradicts the BIPM brochure and sets a very poor example. It should be withdrawn and completely rewritten paying regard to the above recommendations. BBC editors, presenters and journalists may also wish to refer to UKMA's own style guide, which is available at <http://www.ukma.org.uk/publications/style-guide>, where they will find a summary of the rules for the use of metric units together with other helpful advice.

Enforcement

In his letter to the UKMA Chairman in 2005, the Deputy Director-General indicated that the BBC does have a policy of expecting its contributors to use the measurement units most appropriate to their target audience. However, it appears from everyday observation that this policy is frequently not followed in practice: many contributors tend to use the units with which they themselves are most comfortable or familiar, regardless of the needs of the audience. This may be either because the policy is not widely known or because it is not monitored and enforced (or both).

It is therefore recommended that:

- a) the BBC's policy on measurement units (as described above) should be published and communicated to all editors, presenters and journalists and other contributors, including independent programme makers and free lance contributors;

⁵ See http://www.bipm.org/en/si/si_brochure/ for download

⁶ Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/news-style-guide/article/art20130702112133541>

- b) adherence to this policy should be monitored and enforced as part of the BBC's general management.

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