Written evidence submitted by BBC Media Action

Executive Summary:

This paper is written in response to the decision by the International Development Committee of the UK Parliament to undertake an inquiry into DFID’s work in the Middle East and specifically “the effectiveness of DFID’s programme in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.” The paper concentrates on BBC Media Action’s experiences in the Occupied Palestinian Territories where we have been working since November 2011 funded by DFID through a 5-year accountable grant, termed the Global Grant, through DFID’s Policy Division in London. In addition Media Action has, since April 2013, been an implementing partner in a contract won by the British Council under a DFID Framework Tender entitled ‘Supporting Stability and Promoting Democracy in the Occupied Territories.”

The central argument of this submission is that media plays a key part in the lives of Palestinians and that as a result, high quality and editorially robust programmes that allow a cross-section of Palestinian society to hold leaders to account are central to the OPT’s future democratic development. In particular, online and social media are powerful tools for connecting communities which are divided both geographically and politically (West Bank, the Gaza strip, the diaspora), as well as essential mobilisation tools for Palestinian youth.

---

1 The Global Grant is a Strategic Accountable Grant negotiated between BBC Media Action and DFID which has four output areas (Governance, Health, Resilience and Research). The OPT project falls under the Governance output. See Accountable Grant Arrangement for the Global Grant with the BBC World Service Trust, Component Code 202629-101, Purchase Order 4004952.

2 http://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-202886/ See DFID Business Case ‘Supporting Stability and Promoting Democracy Programme in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (SSPD)’.
Background

1. Media plays a key part in the lives of Palestinians. A qualitative formative study commissioned by BBC Media Action in March - April 2012 found that people consume current affairs, entertainment and other media outputs across a striking diversity of distribution media and channels. But access to the local Palestinian media varies throughout the Palestinian Territories due to both technological and political factors. The study showed that although there is a proliferation of media in the Palestinian Territories, media outlets often fail to reflect ordinary Palestinians’ views.

2. In 2012, and building on earlier discussions around the development of public service broadcasting, BBC Media Action approached the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) with the idea of producing an audience-driven debate programme in the style of the UK’s Question Time. PBC and within it, Palestine TV, is the biggest public media network in the Occupied Territories.

3. The Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (which comprises Palestine TV and the Voice of Palestine Radio) was set up after the Oslo Accords in 1993 and traditionally has been biased towards Fatah, the dominant political party within the Palestinian Authority. In recent years, however, the PBC has begun to transition towards more of an autonomous and impartial professional, independent public broadcaster.

4. In 2010, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas issued a presidential decree resolving to convert the PBC from a governmental institution into an independent public institution in terms of both its administration and financing. New programmes and policy changes were enacted and since then, PBC has become the most-watched local channel in the OPT. Palestinians say they watch PBC for local news and programmes that deal directly with their daily lives. A poll in January 2012 found that 45% of young people (aged 18 – 30 years) listed Al Jazeera as their most-watched channel, followed by Palestine TV at 22%.

3 Presidential Decree Number (2) March 2010


5 NEC Survey for Fondation Hirondelle (Dec 2010 – April 2011)

6 Arab World for Research and Development, Results of a Specialized Opinion Poll among Palestinian Youth: Activism, Political Efficacy, Palestinian Internal Politics, Elections, Arab Spring and Negotiations; 1 February 2012,
5. BBC Media Action provides capacity building support for two programmes with Palestinian TV, the weekly *Hur El Kalam (Free Speech)* which has two original episodes a month and *Aswat Min Filesteen (Voices of Palestine)* which is a quarterly programme made in collaboration with BBC Arabic. Both programmes allow a cross section of Palestinian society to hold leaders and civil society actors to account.

**Barriers to freedom of expression in the OPT:**

6. The PA has publicly expressed its belief in the value of both a free media press and freedom of expression in Palestine. “Freedom of opinion should be guaranteed to every individual who has the absolute right to express his/her opinion in a free manner either verbally, in writing, photography, or drawing, as a different means of expression and information,” states the Palestinian Press and Publication Law of 1995. But despite the liberal spirit of this law and the decisive language of PA officials where freedom of expression is concerned, the gap between rhetoric and reality is considered large.⁷

7. In the 2011 annual *Freedom of the Press* report by Freedom House, for example, the Palestinian territories were seen as “not free.” This report cited ongoing pressure and threats to journalists by the Palestinian Authority, Hamas and the Israeli military.

8. In conducting its own formative research, BBC Media Action found that Palestinian media outlets are typically either family-owned or linked to government, private funders, or – in some cases - political party agendas. There are also a number of media outlets owned and run by CSOs and academic institutes. The Palestinian media sector tends to be highly factionalised between pro-Fatah and pro-Hamas outlets.

9. The Palestinian media is made up of small and factionalised stations broadcasting to local communities. The only channels with reach across the territories are Watan TV and Palestine TV. As a result, there is limited opportunity for a truly joined up, national dialogue on pressing issues of concern to ordinary citizens.

10. Nor does a participatory format of this kind exist elsewhere in contemporary OPT. According to former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, “Presently, there are programmes which allow individual journalists to ask difficult questions of decision-makers...(However, these) do not allow for quality dialogue between citizens and decision-

http://www.awrad.org/etemplate.php?id=275&x=4

He added that: “Current shows are not about people’s grievances, but rather about the presenter becoming the show, using his spotlight for fame.”

11. BBC Media Action believes, as does Salam Fayyad, that a participatory media format where the decision maker is in face-to-face interaction with the citizenry makes government officials understand that they are accountable to the public and respond accordingly. He equally emphasized the need to ensure that such dialogue is genuinely inclusive across all sectors of society.

Media development through debate shows:

12. BBC Media Action believes that public service broadcasting is ultimately about serving the needs of audiences. Through a partnership with Palestine TV, BBC Media Action puts the general public at the heart of its programme-making by giving audiences a voice to which they are entitled, by giving them a say in shaping decisions over how their communities are run and by requiring those in power to be accountable to them. In turn, by enabling the availability of accessible and relevant information on a wide range of issues, the hope is that these programmes help contribute to higher levels of self-efficacy, motivation and participation, all necessary drivers of accountability.

13. Our formative research showed that Palestinians are interested in issues that affect the running of their daily lives, whether health service delivery, employment, emigration or domestic violence. The Voices of Palestine programme on domestic violence and sexual harassment, for example, took place at the police college in Jericho. The panel included a female police officer responsible for domestic violence & sexual harassment issues, a female criminologist from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Head of the Sharia Courts. The audience contained both men and women with a strong representation of police cadets. There was a very lively debate about the appropriateness of women’s dress; with female participants making it clear that sexual harassment was unacceptable regardless of clothing choices women may make.

14. The Hur El Kalam programme on the provision of health services raised a number of issues concerning health care rationing. There was heated debate over why some patients were allowed to die from critical illness rather than getting treatment, particularly when it was clear that some hospitals in Israel and Jordan would be willing to carry out the surgery. There was also a strong discussion on why the PA did not do more to punish people who sold counterfeit or out-of-date drugs. The most harrowing

---

8 Interview by BBC Media Action with Salam Fayyad during formative research, March, 2012.
part of the programme was when a man described losing his wife to medical negligence, saying that he felt helpless because there was no mechanism to redress his failings he had experienced in the health system. The Health Minister pledged on the programme to review this gentleman’s case and take action if warranted.

15. We also work closely with our partner stations to build capacity around public service broadcasting values. To make the *Hur El Kalam* programme on disability, for example, BBC Media Action organized a day-long workshop for the production team with a local disability charity. The purpose of the workshop was to sensitise PTV staff to disability issues as well as to how disability is portrayed in the media, something the crew had not previously considered. The programme was extremely powerful, particularly when it became clear that one of the audience members had not been able to take up a position in the ministry responsible for disability because he himself was wheelchair bound and there was no disabled access to the ministry building!

16. Overall, BBC Media Action programming in OPT seeks to secure ‘more accountable, peaceful and inclusive state and non-state relations in the Palestinian context,’ characterised by increased public engagement in and influence over decision-making and service provision; increased responsiveness of government authorities and national service providers to people’s needs, and the evolution of social norms conducive to effective negotiation and debate on governance challenges. We measure impact through levels of informed engagement with governance debate and service delivery; youth motivation and engagement in political processes; and local media capacity to support more constructive and objective governance debate and engagement in OPT. After the first year, our nationally representative data show that both programmes are already achieving many of these targets. (86% of those watching believe that the shows are playing a role in holding government to account and 83% report improved understanding of governance or conflict-relevant issues as a result of watching the shows).

Social Media as a tool for engagement
17. Because of the way the OPT is laid out geographically – spanning two different regions and without free movement between them – it’s not possible to have a fully representative studio audience that cuts across all segments of society. Under such circumstances, social media is a particularly powerful tool for enabling people from different areas to voice their opinions and become part of the process of holding their leaders to account.

18. Palestinians are overwhelmingly young, with approximately 64% of the population under the age of 25 years and 20% of the total population between the ages of 15-24. BBC Media Action’s qualitative formative research underlined the importance of social media for youth (16-25 years) as a means both of consuming current affairs and political material, but also for sharing information and interacting with other actors in civil society. A poll of 1,200 Palestinian youth in January 2012 found that 32% reported having participated at least once in an internet social group to lobby on a public issue. Social media is ubiquitous across all audience segments.

19. Although social media is a very popular media tool in OPT, media programmes concentrating on governance had not previously used social media to connect with audience members. Instead, social media networks such as Facebook had largely been used for individual advocacy efforts.

20. In contrast, social media is a core aspect of both BBC Media Action-supported debate programmes as it allows people from different ages (especially youth) – and regions, as well as the diaspora - to be involved in the discussion rather than being limited to the audience present in the studio. Since starting its official Facebook page, PBC has increased its interaction with the audience five-fold.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

9 West Bank and Gaza Strip, Population Census of 2007, UNRWA Briefing Paper January 2010
http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2010012035949.pdf

10 Arab World for Research and Development, Results of a Specialized Opinion Poll among Palestinian Youth: Activism, Political Efficacy, Palestinian Internal Politics, Elections, Arab Spring and Negotiations; 1 February 2012,
http://www.awrad.org/etemplate.php?id=275&x=4
21. The media is a potentially powerful tool in enabling a peaceful, inclusive, accountable OPT, with more than 85% of those watching BBC Media Action-supported debate programmes believing that the shows are playing a role in holding government to account.

22. BBC Media Action’s needs analysis shows that participatory media formats that engage people and politicians alike on issues of everyday service delivery are both demanded – and feasible – in OPT.

23. Due to the particular characteristics of Palestinian demographic, economic and social divisions, as well as the importance of the Palestinian diaspora, the internet provides a unique platform for communication and engagement. Social media helps reduce offline boundaries and offset the lack of mobility in the territories and beyond, while also drawing in youth audiences.

24. Nearly one third of Palestinian youth surveyed by BBC Media Action reported using social media at least once to engage in public affairs. In a territory where nearly 2/3 of the entire population is under the age of 25, schools and universities alike should be encouraged to develop curricula that teach media literacy so that students learn to use social media tools in a responsible manner and in support of a public purpose.

25. Local media might also consider experimenting with non-traditional forms of media that can stimulate discussion and debate on governance in the OPT. Programming from elsewhere suggests that drama series, game shows, quizzes and satire can also play a role in holding leaders governments to account.

26. Government agencies should be encouraged to actively encourage and provide opportunities for citizens to express opinions, ask questions and receive a credible response. Government departments in the OPT should promote services more effectively, accept public criticism of those services and take part in relevant media programming that enables citizens to express opinions, ask questions and receive a credible response.

27. The emerging field of mGovernance elsewhere in the developing world offers a particularly compelling example in this regard. On the supply side, mobile phones are being used to provide people with basic information about local and national politics via SMS and voice-based communication software. On the demand side, even quite basic mobile phones are being used for accountability ends as diverse as monitoring elections, improving service delivery and tackling corruption at the local level.