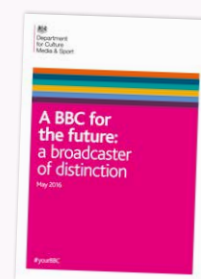


BBC CHARTER REVIEW 2016

Save public broadcasting

The government has produced a White Paper to determine how the BBC will be run for the next ten years. In the autumn it will publish a new Charter to put its proposals into effect.



The BBC stands for public service broadcasting, the system that produces the best entertainment, education and information that the public want.

The government's plans threaten that system and the whole ecology of British broadcasting.

This special report sets out what's wrong with the plans and what needs to be done.

We want to see an independent, well-funded, democratic BBC, part of a thriving 'public service ecology'; a space on television, radio and online where the huge range of programmes and approaches we have come to value can thrive, all for the cost of a licence-fee which is well below the charge for a commercial subscription channel.

Keep it popular, keep it independent

THE BBC is more than a TV and radio station. It is a pivot of the UK's cultural life, propagating all aspects of social, political and artistic activity. It is watched and listened to by 97 per cent of the UK population

It is the most popular and trusted source of news, and the foundation of one of the country's most important industries.

It leads in pretty well every field in which it operates: popular and serious music, politics and documentary, business and consumer, drama and soap, sport and leisure, comedy and general entertainment. Its website is a world leader.

The BBC is not "subsidised" by taxpayers; it is paid for by every citizen to whom its service is offered, like any other public service. It is also a fantastic bargain: for all those services, £12 a month. The absolute basic subscription to Sky for meanwhile, went up in June to £22.50 a month with the top premium whack at £56. And what channel comes top of those watched by Sky subscribers? BBC1.

Because it is paid for by the licence fee, it is independent of state control. But to justify the licence fee, in the face of criticism that it is an unfair tax, it has to generate huge audiences, to be a mass popular broadcaster. This means producing the same popular programming as commercial broadcasters, only better. It does succeed in this: by and large it does entertainment, sport, news and current affairs much better than ITV or commercial radio and often than Channel 4. It gets much the highest ratings.

Victim of its own success

BUT THE BBC is under attack: It is a victim of its own success. Its popularity and market share make commercial media grind their teeth in jealous fury. They rage that it's unfair competition, that the BBC is subsidised by the taxpayers. What they mean of course is, here are these huge audiences that we can't profit from. They argue that the BBC should not be allowed to produce popular programming. Critics include Culture Secretary John Whittingdale, who was reported in May to be seeking to control the BBC's output to prevent it. The idea didn't make the White Paper – it's simply not possible – but Whittingdale also said that BBC should focus on "distinctive content". "Distinctive" in this context is code for "not popular" – that is, elite minority programming that the market can't make profitable.

This is precisely what the BBC should NOT do. Once it loses its popular lead it loses its claim to universal funding and its whole *raison d'être*. Keep it popular.

In the face of persistent attempts by its lesser media rivals to destabilise the BBC, and it needs constant affirmative action by its supporters to defend it.

What's not to like about it?

THE BBC has its well-known faults; indeed it has more that are not picked on by right-wing politicians and their media. But these are mostly the result of the hostile political environment in which -- astonishingly for a treasured national institution -- it must operate.

The BBC is punch-drunk. There is a climate of defeatism at the top level that paralyses any exercise of independence and makes programming conservative and predictable: the talent shows and "reality" TV with its contrived competition between contestants; the same costume dramas and detective series.

The news is even worse: stiflingly pro-establishment and pro-USA on security, defence and world affairs; and incapable of treating fairly radical alternatives such as those of the new Labour leadership, let alone the Greens! It can only acknowledge the widespread public disillusionment with mainstream party politics by giving unlimited airtime to Nigel Farage.

The BBC always had a tendency to default to wartime "Ministry of Information" mode on security matters, for fear of being accused of treachery. This is not an empty threat. Whenever Britain goes to war, the first thing governments do is accuse the BBC of treason -- no need for evidence -- to bring it into line, and it always works.

With the invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, the government actually had

some evidence: a critical story quoting (anonymously but accurately) a weapons scientist who was found dead shortly after being named by Downing Street. A rigged inquiry was held that reliably found the BBC at fault. The BBC governors caved in and their chairman, Gavin Davies, and Director-General Greg Dyke were forced out.

Never again, government determined, would such independence be allowed. Right-wing trustees with no media experience (Sir Michael Lyons, Lord Chris Patten, and Rona Fairhead) were brought in to head the BBC's governing body, the BBC Trust, and keep things under control.

Since then management has collaborated with every new move against them. Twice, in 2010 and 2015, they capitulated to big government-imposed cuts in funding, which froze the licence fee and increased the costs the BBC must cover, with hardly a whimper.

There is a huge gap between productive staff and the managerial class. The Jimmy Savile scandal went unreported because the BBC is a vast and unresponsive bureaucracy in which workers are scared to rock the boat, to make issues of things that will mean trouble. All the journalists who tried to raise the alarm or report the Savile story have been got rid of; not one is left on the staff.

At times this Kafkaesque apparatus seems incapable of reform. From time to time layers of managers are stripped away, only to somehow reappear.

The BBC is subject to the wrong kind of accountability. Instead of being cowed by government and the corporate media, who have no authority over it at all, it should be taking notice of the public -- its owners and audiences, who want to support, not undermine it.

Who wants to do the BBC down?

SINCE the late 1980s the debate about the BBC has been influenced by policies designed to promote commercially funded communications and reduce, significantly, the role of publicly funded broadcasting, and in particular the BBC, in the UK media.

The Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC (1986) argued that the BBC should eventually, become a subscription service, offering only those programmes which the market could not provide, to those able and willing to pay. The idea that everybody should have access to a wide range of content at very low cost was rejected.

The committee argued that in the future people would have to pay for content like they paid for newspapers or books. It was designed to benefit the major corporations who dominate our media, not citizens, and it undermined the idea that at the core of our communications there should be a relatively inexpensive producer of content, which put the public interest above private profit.

Since then there has been an explosion of commercial, digital, satellite, cable and internet content, much of it barely regulated. A regulator, OFCOM, was set up to promote these developments. Pressure from the BBC's rivals resulted in OFCOM gaining powers over the BBC's ability to develop new projects -- limiting its capacity to engage in projects that its rivals objected to.

These policies were promoted under the Labour governments of 1997-2010, because the party leadership was committed to market 'reforms' across the public sector. But they, at least, believed that the BBC should remain a powerful organisation within the new environment.

The Tory government elected in 2015 changed all that. It is a government driven by a desire to reduce the role of public services in our lives, including broadcasting. Its supporters in the big commercial media companies have continued to press that the BBC be made to provide a radically reduced service. That will allow them to expand into areas formerly offered by the BBC -- and make more money.

The White Paper therefore poses a serious threat to the BBC and through that, to the universal provision of information, education and entertainment, at low cost across television, radio, satellite, cable, and the internet.

Communications should be enriching our lives, not the bank accounts of the large media corporations.

The BBC White Paper: what it says, what it means and what should be done

Who governs the BBC?

The government is setting up a BBC 'Unitary Board, responsible to the commercial media regulator OFCOM (The Office of Communications),. It is handing power over the BBC to an organisation set up primarily to promote the expansion of commercially funded media. On past history it is highly likely that OFCOM will use its powers to prevent the BBC producing material which its competitors object to.

Currently the BBC Trust must promote the interests of viewers and listeners. Now this falls to Ofcom, which should undertake regular audience surveys and facilitate audience participation. Ofcom's board itself needs to be representative of the widest range of views in community.

Currently the BBC Trust puts forward a 'public interest' justification for new initiatives, such as new channels or online services, while Ofcom balances this against their 'market impact'. With its new responsibilities, Ofcom should ensure that 'public interest' takes priority.

Recommendation: OFCOM should be reformed so that its main aim is the promotion of public service communications and to the boards governing both it and the BBC, should be properly representative of the diversity of interests in society. As the regulation of the BBC is to lie with OFCOM, it should set up a department with the specific remit to promote public service.

Distinctive programmes.

The White Paper asserts that the 'distinctiveness' should be at the heart of BBC programming. This means reducing the BBC to producing content which the market cannot, or will not, provide, leaving popular programming to the commercial sector. This is guaranteed to foment popular opposition to the BBC. Why pay for something which produces content the vast majority of people never access?

Recommendation: The BBC should be required to provide the fullest possible range of public service content across all available platforms, and not be relegated to producing 'distinctive' output.

Finances

The BBC's licence fee is being used increasingly to fund things other than the BBC. It is now required to pay for the Welsh channel S4C, the World Service, the licence fees of people over 75 and to fund the production of local news on behalf of private newspaper companies. The government is planning to raid the licence fee to set up fund so that commercial companies can bid for chunks of BBC money. On top of this the BBC must cut jobs and services. The end product will be a continuing squeeze on BBC resources, and a reduction in the quality of its service. This, in turn, will give support to those who argue that the bulk of the licence fee should go, not to the BBC, but to the commercial sector.

Recommendation: The licence fee should be spent on funding BBC services only and not be used to fund other government services or private media companies. The subsidising of licences for the over-75s, the World Service and other media should be reversed.

Contracting out

The government supports BBC management plans to contract out the production of all its output, except news, to independent producers, and to set up its own production company, BBC Studios, as the equivalent of an independent company, to bid for contracts. This means that, in time, the BBC will lose facilities, staff and expertise, turning it into a mere commissioning organisation. By tying the BBC to the interests of large commercial companies, it will diminish its ability to train staff, pay them properly, encourage equal opportunities and develop innovative, creative output. Why? Because it will lose the capacity that an integrated system of production has given it over the last 90 years to develop staff and programmes and to take creative risks. It will

also bolster the position of those who believe that the licence fee should not go to the BBC, but should be distributed amongst its commercial competitors.

Recommendation: The BBC should produce the overwhelming majority of its programmes in its own facilities with its own permanent staff.

Subscription

The White Paper says the BBC will be encouraged to create subscription services. This is a major step towards reducing the role of the BBC and public service broadcasting in the media environment. A subscription funded BBC is likely to provide only 'distinctive' programmes – that is a service which most people will not want to use because it does not provide the kind of diverse content that the BBC has so successfully produced for decades. A subscription funded BBC, as the Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC (1986) recommended, would be a marginal organisation floating around on the edges of a mass commercial system. It would be like the underfunded and marginal public service television system in the USA.

Recommendation: The BBC should not provide any subscription services.

Online Services

The Government has been pressing the BBC to withdraw from its online services. The claim, as yet unproven, is that these services provide unfair competition for commercial providers. But commercial providers are there to make money, while the BBC provides a range of services for the public. Cutting online service provision is a way of forcing the public to pay more for commercial services, and undermining public support for an organisation which is seen to be no longer providing the services it once did.

Recommendation: The BBC should be allowed to develop and sustain online services on the basis of whether or not they provide a valuable public service.

The licence fee

The licence fee is the foundation of the BBC's independence: collected and allocated without government direction. But for once, when the Tories attack the system, they have a point. They say that the fee is a flat rate levy, the same for rich and poor, and with the force of law. Culture secretary John Whittingdale has said that it is worse than the poll tax because that had relief for the poor. Sometimes people are imprisoned for their inability to pay. It's not an imprisonable offence not to pay the fee but about 50 people a year are jailed for failure to pay the fine and they are all poor people.

The BBC and the culture department have been working on schemes to "decriminalise" the fee but this would be unworkable: the right-wing press would launch campaigns for non-payment.

A second problem has been widely acknowledged: the fee's technological redundancy. It is based on the ownership of a TV set, a box full of wires, at a time when more and more viewing is done online. More than a million households watch TV programmes online or on catch-up and do not possess a set. Measures are being enacted to rectify this anomaly.

It has also been agreed that the licence fee as it stands can go one more round, but it cannot survive the next charter review. Its replacement must be a likewise universal non-government-directed payment.

Best would be a household charge levied with the council tax. County police forces are funded in this way, and similar "audio-visual tax" arrangements are used elsewhere in Europe.

Recommendation: The BBC licence fee must be replaced by a universal national payment, independent of central government, and all BBC services, aired or online, must be free to access.

What kind of BBC do we want?

As we outline what kind of BBC we want, we must recognise that the BBC does not exist in isolation. So we begin with the place of the BBC amongst UK broadcasters, and end by looking forward to the online digital future.

A public service ecology

We want a broadcasting system which will ensure the continuation of the UK's unique 'public service ecology', underpinned by different types of funding and strong regulation.

Over the years, competition between the publicly-funded BBC, and ITV and the other advertising-funded channels has brought many benefits. It has meant that the BBC cannot ignore audience appeal, while the commercial channels must look beyond pure monetary considerations. Channel 4 is commercially funded but publicly owned with a remit to be different. All channels are committed to entertainment, information and education. This has created a UK-based system which is not solely driven by market values and is admired and respected across the world. However, it is under threat. Channel 5 is already US owned, while both Channel 4 and ITV may be bought by global corporations.

A commitment to public service across the channels

Public service content should be more than just programmes which are important but not profitable.

Public service means serving the public in the widest possible sense. We want a broadcasting system in which the regulator will ensure a commitment to broad public values across all UK channels, so that they can continue to complement each other and compete for quality and audience appeal rather than for income.

'Contestable' funds could be made available to all channels to subsidise less profitable programmes, such as children's programmes. These should be raised from major commercial companies, including internet companies, not from the BBC's licence fee.

The commitment to serving the public should be extended to the BBC's free online services, which should not be cut back.

A genuinely independent BBC

We want a BBC which is genuinely independent from government. This means:

- a** The renewal of its Charter should be subject to decision by the House of Commons, not the Government of the day.
- b** The funding of the BBC should not be under government control as it is

at present. There should be an independent, democratically constituted body to set the level of the licence fee (or whatever revised funding arrangement is in place).

- c** It should be recognised that the licence fee/funding arrangement is not a tax, but a fee which goes directly to the BBC. Only the BBC should decide how it is used. The government should not be able to use licence-fee-payers' money for other purposes.

A democratic BBC

The governance of the BBC should be democratised.

It should not be up to the Government to decide who sits on the new 'Unitary Board' which will manage the BBC and take crucial decisions about its policy and content. BBC employees should be represented through relevant trade unions, and there should be representatives who are elected by, and directly responsible to, viewers, listeners and those who use online services.

Powers over licensing, content and oversight should be devolved to the Nations and Regions. These should have their own Boards of Management with local representation.

The BBC should address issues of diversity, both in relation to gender and ethnicity, at all levels, especially at the higher management level.

A digital public space

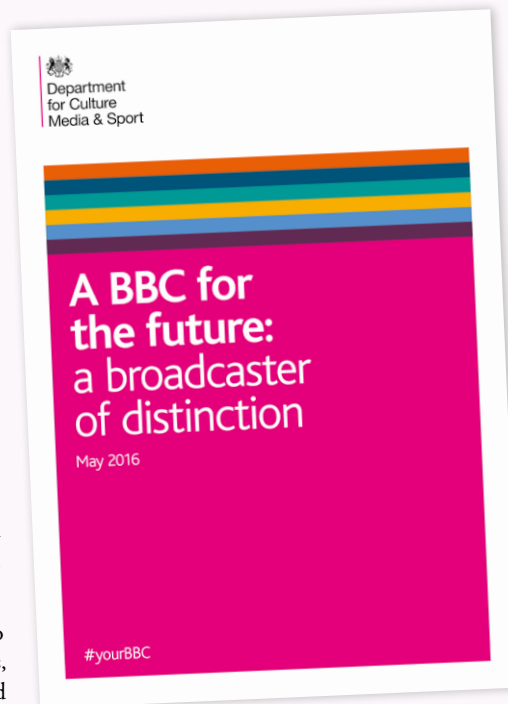
Looking forward, we support the proposal for a 'digital public space'.

As broadcasting is increasingly merging with online services, a 'digital public space' would be the equivalent of free-to-air television. Funded by an extended licence fee/ funding mechanism, it would be an advertising-free allocation of internet bandwidth, free at the point of use, at home and in key public places.

It would be a space where BBC programmes can be found, and will also be available to museums, libraries, art galleries and other public services.

This new form of public service for the digital age would go back to the original purpose of the licence fee: not just to fund the BBC, but to secure the infrastructure which ensured the democratic principles of a universal service funded by a universal payment.

We want to see an independent, well-funded, democratic BBC, part of a thriving 'public service ecology'; a space on television, radio and online where the huge range of programmes and approaches we have come to value can thrive, all for the cost of a licence-fee which is well below the charge for a commercial subscription channel.



WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO, IN ORGANISATIONS OR AS INDIVIDUALS, TO PUSH FOR CHANGE

- Raise the issue in your organisation, political party, trade union, local campaigning group
- Put forward motions for reform of media policy. Contact the CPBF for details
- Ensure that these issues are put forward to your MP
- Affiliate to the CPBF
- Ask the CPBF for a speaker for meetings.

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