

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

KEEPING BROADCASTING PUBLIC

The BBC and the 2006 Charter Review

Tom O'Malley

CPBF 2005.

Introduction

The BBC is a major part of our daily lives. It entertains and informs us across radio, the internet and TV. It is a testimony to the success of the public funding of broadcasting. It is central to the development of the political and cultural life of the country. We need to build on this success to create a better, more democratic, more creative BBC in the 21st Century. The BBC's Charter was last renewed in 1996. It has to be renewed again in 2006.

On 11 December 2003 the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, launched a two year consultation to see how the BBC 'should be adapted for the future'¹

This pamphlet sets out some of the reasons why you, your community group, trade union or local political party should intervene in the debate, and some ideas about what can be done.



Public Service Broadcasting

In 2003, each household in the UK watched on average just over 26 hours of television a week, and listened to more than 43 hours of radio.² How broadcasting is funded, organised and controlled should therefore matter to anyone concerned about the quality of our lives, our democracy and our cultures.

Public Service Broadcasting in the UK

Public service broadcasting means producing programmes which address the widest possible range of audiences, and serve the public at large, not just certain sections of the public, or the interests of producers and broadcasters or the dictates of the market. Public service broadcasting means producing programmes designed to cover the widest possible range of output. It means news and current affairs. It means educational and arts programmes. It also means comedy, soaps like *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, drama serials like *Prime Suspect* and *Silent Witness*, sport, films, quiz shows and light entertainment like *Fame Academy*. For the BBC, it also means providing music and speech radio full of variety and quality and providing one to the most successful range of internet web pages in the world.

The backbone of broadcasting in the UK, the BBC (TV and Radio), ITV 1, Channel 4, S4C and Channel Five, are services that are required to provide a range, at different levels of intensity, of public service programmes. The BBC is funded by a licence fee and

**GRADE
SIGNALS
SHAKE-UP
IN THE WAY
BBC IS RUN**

Financial Times
03:04:2004

the commercial sector depends on advertising and sponsorship. Since 1954, commercial TV in the UK, unlike its counterpart in the USA, has had significant public service obligations.

Since 1990, (see Chapter 2) ITV has become less and less of a public service broadcaster, but it and the other public service commercial channels still retain obligations to provide programming that is designed to do something more than just make profits.

As the BBC has recently argued, 'Public service broadcasting is to an important degree about experimentation and risk-taking, and a broadcaster which never fails is not taking sufficient risks'.³ There are, however, other commercial broadcasters, most notably Sky television, which do not have public service broadcasting obligations, and only produce programming that maximises their profits.⁴

What the public think about the BBC as a provider of PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING?

Audience research commissioned by the BBC in June 2003 demonstrated that public support for public service broadcasting in the UK and for the BBC is strong. Compared to its commercial rivals the BBC's television output was judged better in 17 out of 22 areas.⁵

The attack on public service broadcasting since the 1980s

Given the importance of the BBC and of public service in television, what, you might ask, is the problem? Surely, the BBC will sail through this Charter Review? Well, there are powerful forces that want the system changed. They want a system where, as in the USA public broadcasting has been reduced to surviving 'on donations and has an audience of around 2 percent'.⁶

A right turn...Broadcasting policy since the 1980s.

In 1986, the UK had four TV channels. Since then, there has been an explosion of TV and radio, mainly through the arrival of cable, satellite and digital TV channels, most of which are subscription or advertising funded. By 30 June 2004, 55% of UK households had digital TV. Sky Television had around 7 million subscribers and the BBC free digital service, Freeview, had 4 million. The total number of subscribers to cable TV had reached around 3.36 million.⁷

However, since 1986, successive Tory and New Labour governments have adopted policies designed to increase the amount of commercially funded broadcasting in the UK.

The 1990 Broadcasting Act reduced the amount of public service broadcasting that ITV had to produce and forced companies to bid often huge sums of money for the right to run one of the then 15 regional TV companies. This put huge pressure on the resources of many of the successful companies and led to cut backs

in spending on programming.

Sky TV was allowed to break into the market at the same time. It did not have the any costly public service obligations and so was able to compete unfairly with ITV. No government has since forced it to take on public service obligations to produce a level playing field between Sky and the ITV companies.⁸

The 2003 Communications Act gave powers over commercial broadcasting to the Office of Communications (Ofcom), which is intended to promote commercial competition in communications – that is TV, radio, satellite, cable and telecoms – excluding the BBC. The government also relaxed rules governing both foreign ownership of UK TV and media concentration.

Soon after, the effects of the new rules were felt. In February 2004, the old regional ITV system in England and Wales finally collapsed into one company, ITV. After 1990, the BBC and ITV were forced to take 25% of their programming from companies that were independent of the main broadcasters.

Independents brought innovation. However, there is a downside. As the independents have grown, so have casualisation and poor working conditions. As Michael Darlow, has put it: 'Until the 1980s, most jobs in TV were well-paid, pensionable and permanent in 2002 almost a third of those working were freelances.

Behind them lay tens of thousands more not working – a pool of anxious, frustrated, under-or-unemployed people, increasingly open to exploitation.'⁹

ITV

The under-regulated competition from Sky and other commercial channels hit ITV hardest. By 2004 audience share of ITV and Channel 4 in satellite homes was little more than half of what it was in non-satellite, or analogue, homes.¹⁰

ITV has responded to the competition by watering down its public service provision. It cut its local output by 12% on average in 2002 and its non-news regional output declined by one third in 2003.¹¹ It has made its schedules more populist and announced closures and job losses. In November 2003, Meridian management announced a raft of job cuts, totalling 150 posts and studio closures, which meant that it would no longer have any general production studio capacity in its franchise area. In March 2004, ITV decided to cut 200 jobs at its Central Birmingham and Nottingham studios. In 2004, Tyne Tees also embarked on plans to cut 20-30 jobs. Speculation was strong in 2004 that ITV plc planned to merge with the two remaining major ITV companies, Ulster TV and the Scottish Media Group. In profit terms, all of this paid off. By June 2004 ITV's profits, before tax and other costs, were up 42% to £132m.¹²

At a cost...

However, the cost to public service broadcasting of introducing under-regulated competition for the BBC and ITV has been high. According to Ofcom between 1998 and 2003:

- spending fell on arts children's religious and educational programming
- drama and factual programming saw a narrowing of

GRADE ORDERS INVESTIGATION INTO BBC'S FINANCES

Independent
13:08:2004

the range of content they covered

specialist programmes on topics like arts and current affairs were pushed to the edges of peak viewing hours.¹³

The Politics of the 2006 Charter Review

One of the forces behind these changes has been economics. The new commercial environment has created huge revenue sources for some companies like Sky.

In 2002/2003, the licence fee raised about £2.7 billion - nearly 95% of the revenue available to the BBC.¹⁴

However, the BBC's revenues should be put in the context of the much greater size of the advertising and subscription market. In 2003, subscription revenues stood at £3.295 billion, advertising at £3.240 billion and 'other' revenues (sponsorship, shopping channels, premium rate telephony and interactive services) at another £1 billion.¹⁵

The pressure on the BBC

In February 2004, a Conservative Party-sponsored report by a group called the Broadcasting Policy Group was published.

The views expressed in *Broadcasting Beyond the Charter* were a summation of almost two decades of criticism of public service broadcasting. The report

recommended that:

the licence fee be reduced

ITV be released from its public service commitments from 2007

the BBC should be divested of its production arm to 'open up the full extent of the BBC schedules to competitive supply'.

a new body, the Public Broadcasting Authority, should be established which would 'take responsibility for the delivery of all public service content'. It would be funded by the Treasury and accountable to Ofcom. This latter point was similar to one in the 1986 Report of the Committee on the Financing of the BBC, (the Peacock Report).¹⁶

This report was part of a period of intense political pressure on the BBC, orchestrated by those like the Broadcasting Policy Group who wanted to see further market reforms in UK broadcasting.

The BBC blinks – and cuts...

In November 2003, the BBC decided to sell BBC Technology to Siemens, in spite of the fact that since its launch it has delivered 'significant benefits to the BBC, £19m in profit and price reductions in 2002/3 alone'.¹⁷

In July 2004, the BBC ordered a review of its commercial arm, and of BBC 1's output in response to the allegation that the BBC was 'crowding-out' new companies by producing programmes that could be made by its commercial rivals.

This allegation was quickly shown to be false. In September 2004, the commercial media regulator,

Ofcom concluded that ‘we do not have sufficient evidence to prove or to disprove the existence of overall “crowding-out”’¹⁸

In August, Michael Grade called in a firm of accountants to review the Corporation’s finances. At the same time, there was increasing speculation that some, or all of BBC Worldwide might be sold off.¹⁹

In December 2004, Mark Thompson, the BBC’s Director General, announced a major organisational shake out. It involved:

- cutting, 2,500 jobs in administration, 400 in programming and another 2,400 by selling off BBC Broadcast Resources;

- an across the board 15% cut in programme making costs

- pushing the amount of BBC production available to independents up to 50% from 25%.²⁰

It could be that the BBC did this to ward off worse measures that might have been imposed by the government. However, in taking these steps before the publication and debate over 2005 White Paper on the Charter the managers have succeeded in pre-empting the whole process. They also signalled support for reducing the level of production facilities and staff available to the BBC for producing public service television.

Choice or no choice?

The long-term aim of government policy is based on ideas outlined in the Peacock Report in 1986. It is to reduce public service broadcasting and the BBC to providing only those radio and TV services that it is not profitable enough for the market to make. This approach assumes that markets are the best way of providing choice in the economy, society and broadcasting.²¹

Choice for some...as long as you can pay for it

In broadcasting you need to know what is being provided before you can tell what you like. If you sample a programme, you may not want to pay directly for what is on offer. To overcome this problem, purely commercial broadcasters will try to sell you something they know you already like and are willing to pay for, without having to let you try it free. They will also be reluctant to invest in programmes that are risky and for which they cannot be sure there is a market. That is why Sky is driven by pay-per-view football and movies. Commercial operations such as Sky do not provide the range of choice of styles, topics and new forms of programmes that public service broadcasters are required to offer us. It is therefore undeniable that public service broadcasting offers viewers more variety of output, more opportunity to experience and learn to enjoy new things, more regularly and more cheaply than purely commercially driven services.

The USA today, the UK tomorrow?

If you want to know where we are going, look to the USA, where the commercial values dominate. There, the relative absence of public service values in US TV and radio means that the majority of people get a diet of programming designed to sell goods. In addition, news programmes are overwhelmingly one sided in political outlook.

The media pressure group, *Fair*²² in the USA analysed 1,1617 sources that appeared on the evening news of six US TV networks during the three weeks following the launch of the attack on Iraq on 20 March 2003. Fair found that 64% - or almost two-thirds - of all sources were pro-war, and 71% of the guests on the programmes from the USA supported the war. Anti-war sources were only 10% of all sources. As one commentator has put it, 'Once the war began, the major network studies were virtually off-limits to vehement opponents of the War'.²³

The most important consequences of the victory of the market ideal in US broadcasting is that the bulk of Americans are subjected to an unremitting diet of entertainment designed to maximise profits and have very little choice of political perspective where broadcast news is concerned.²⁴

Regulating Broadcasting

Putting the BBC under Ofcom?

Should the BBC be regulated by Ofcom? There are three main arguments against this.

Firstly, Ofcom was designed to promote a more commercial broadcasting environment with less positive content regulation. That is one important reason why it was set up.²⁵ Handing the BBC over to a body designed to get undermine the regulation on which high quality public service broadcasting rests is not sensible.

Secondly, Ofcom's main governing board has no formal representation from the nations, regions, or communities of interest that make up the UK and is made up people who are predominately from a commercial background.²⁶

Thirdly, in September 2004 Ofcom made a set of proposals explicitly designed to minimise the role of public service broadcasting and the BBC in the UK. It proposed that:

- the BBC's income should 'not cost any more in real terms' than it did in 2003. In other words the BBC's income should be frozen

- ITV should drop the bulk of its national and regional programming (in Wales, the Midlands etc) and that the BBC should be made to pick up the bill and do these extra programmes

- in future the BBC consider privatising some of its activities and charging subscription fees to viewers

- the BBC be forced to have all of its plans for expansion subjected to independent scrutiny—

**THOMPSON
READY TO AXE
THOUSANDS OF
BBC STAFF**

Observer Business
24:10:2004

something Ofcom does not propose for the BBC's rivals.²⁷

The BBC Governors

The BBC's Board of Governors is marginally better than Ofcom's main board. At least there is a relatively wider range of people on it, drawn from the nations and regions and from a broader social base.²⁸

Governors, however, are appointed by politicians not elected. The public have no more say over who is on the Governors than they have over who is on the Ofcom board.

In January 2004, the Labour government forced the resignation of Director General Greg Dyke by subjecting the BBC to a massive campaign of public attack over its reporting of the war on Iraq. This attack came in spite of the fact that overall the BBC (and other broadcasters) coverage of the War was 'generally sympathetic to the government's case'. The Governors dutifully took their cue from their masters in Westminster and effectively sacked Greg Dyke.²⁹ The Governors have not always rolled over and allowed governments to have their way, but the system of appointing Governors makes them dependent on politicians and so eternally vulnerable to political pressure.

Funding the BBC

The licence fee remains the fairest way of funding the BBC.

It is a 'poll-tax' - in that we all have to pay it regardless of our income. But so too are petrol duties, road tax and VAT. Getting rid of the licence fee because it is a 'poll tax' would call into question the method the government uses to fund substantial parts of its activities. Ofcom found a high level of public support for the licence fee in research it conducted for its 2004 review of public service TV.³⁰

Giving a part of the licence fee - 'top slicing' in the jargon of the industry - to commercial companies to make 'public service programmes' would undermine the BBC. It would also remove an incentive from Sky and other commercial broadcasters to make programmes of quality out of their own income.

Building for the future

The idea that the new digital age means you cannot have significant public service channels because there will be too many channels for it to work distorts the truth

Regulations can be put into place to ensure that the major services in the UK are required to adhere to key public service values. Ofcom has outlined a variety of ways to intervene to develop public service broadcasting in the UK, using a mixture of the licence

fee, a levy on new entrants into the UK TV market, tax incentives and direct government grant.³¹

The BBC

The BBC needs to be developed as a public service broadcaster, funded by the licence fee. There should be no freeze on the licence fee.

BBC services must continue to be free at the point of use to all people in the UK.

The BBC should continue to provide a full range of services across the whole range of broadcasting, including news, current affairs, original drama, original comedy, radio, music, light entertainment and information services.

The BBC should not have its licence fee 'top-sliced'. This will bleed the organisation dry.

The BBC should retain its production base and build on it, especially in the nations and regions. It should not sell off its facilities nor privatise any of its departments.

The governance of the BBC needs to be put out to proper, separate public consultation during the debate over the Green Paper on the Charter in early 2005.

The Campaign believes that all of the broadcasting regulation needs to be democratised.³² Broadcasting matters could be devolved to national and regional communication councils. These might include representatives of the national parliaments and assemblies in the UK and people appointed by nominating bodies. The nominating bodies should be organisations that represent people in their workplace

and local communities, and they could select people for the communication councils through a process of internal election. They in turn would nominate candidates for election to the BBC Board of Governors and the Board of Governors of Ofcom.

The Commercial Sector

Doing something about the BBC is no good unless something is done about the commercial sector as well. It is ludicrous to make the BBC, S4C, C4 and C5 carry the responsibility and cost for providing high-quality public service broadcasting whilst their competitors provide whatever cheap fare makes a profit.

We should:

- make the main Ofcom board a democratically representative body
- make Ofcom's primary job the promotion of the public interest in mass communications by stimulating public service values and practices across the media
- introduce requirements on companies that have a significant share of the audio-visual market to provide a public service programming
- require Ofcom to devise policy tools to enable the sustenance and development of ITV, Channel 4, S4C and Channel 5 as providers of public service broadcasting on digital platforms
- tighten radically the laws on media mergers and set proper limits on media cross ownership
- strictly define an 'independent' company in terms of

JOHN BIRT AND THE BITTER STRUGGLE FOR THE BBC'S SOUL

The Observer
5:09:2004

ownership and size to ensure that those companies that benefit from licence fee payers money are not large and/or linked to major media multinationals remove the BBC completely from Ofcom's remit, except where the BBC's seeks to engage in a form of licensed commercial communications.

Ofcom wants to freeze the amount of money spent on public service programming over the next ten-year period. It also wants to see the end of ITV as public service provider of programming in the nations and regions. As the National Union of Journalists has recently argued:

'ITV should be offered the option of continuing to be a main stream provider of PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING programming in a digital age, with appropriate support in the form of tax incentives, grants, EPG prominence, must carry rules, and multiplex capacity

If, however, ITV wishes to retreat from its role as a public service broadcaster, Ofcom should look to ways of asking ITV to compensate the public for the loss of the 'brand' of ITV. This would involve asking ITV to change its name, and to pay money towards funding public service broadcasting in the digital age, if it chose to stop being a provider of PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

In addition, Ofcom should seek changes in the law to ensure that the public had rights over ITV's back catalogue for the whole of the period in which it benefited from the privileges granted by being a public service provider.'³³

In the future, the government needs to ensure that the money spent on public service broadcasting remains constant relative to the size of the broadcasting industry. We should not allow the amount of money spent on commercial broadcasting to rise without ensuring that the amount spent on public service broadcasting increases in real terms.

A Public Service Publisher (PSP)?

Ofcom has proposed setting up a new, non-commercial, Public Service Publisher, which will compete with the BBC by providing what it describes as public service broadcasting on a new digital channel. On the surface this seems a good idea. It is right to look to new ways of delivering public service content across the new platforms of the digital age.

But on closer examination the PSP proposal has real flaws.

Ofcom has pointed out that in 2003 total TV broadcasting revenues, including the licence fee amounted to £9.534 billion.³⁴ Yet it suggests that in 2012, £300 million,³⁵ less than 3% of the 2003 revenues in UK TV, should be spent on the PSP. This is a tiny amount, compared to the ITV revenues in 2003 (£2.6 billion), let alone the size of the total market. The existence of a non-commercial publisher might, in the future, be an addition to the public service mix. It must not be a substitute for what ITV should be providing.

However, Ofcom is allowing ITV to withdraw from its major public service commitments and is implying that

the PSP would be meaningful force for sustaining public service provision in the digital future. This is clearly not the case.

Ofcom should therefore consider ways to generate a properly managed increase in support for ITV, C4, C5 and S4C so that they can continue to act as commercially funded public service broadcasters in the future.

Digital Switchover

Now television services can be received by any TV set with an aerial. If you want the extra free BBC and ITV digital channels you have to subscribe to cable or Sky. You can get Freeview for no subscription, but you will have to pay anything from £30 - £100 for a digital receiving box. In addition, in some areas, such as Wales where the terrain is mountainous, you might have to spend more money on getting a new TV aerial fitted. If all the population is to have equal access to digital and Freeview, the government should fund the purchase and fitting of digital boxes and any new aerials for those people on low incomes, especially pensioners.

Building for the future

We need to establish a fund to build community media centres where people can receive media training and produce programmes for transmission on radio and TV that express a wide range of opinions.

These would be funded by a levy on the advertising,

subscription and sponsorship revenue of the major commercial companies. They would be democratically run and accountable to the national or regional media councils that would take an oversight of the work of the commercial and BBC activities.

These bodies would have recognised trade unions and would have a duty not to undercut wages and conditions in the BBC and the main commercial companies.

Beyond the BBC

We have gone beyond the BBC in this pamphlet. We have done this because, in addition to our proposals on the licence fee and the governance of the BBC and Ofcom, we think there needs to a radical overhaul of the purposes around which the communications industry in the UK is organised and of its relationship to the public.

We now face a future where the government, the elites in the civil service and those at the top of the commercial media industry have embraced a system that will allow choice to those with privilege and money. For the rest of us it will simply mean we get whatever cheap product can be foisted on us for whatever price the market will bear.

The people driving this change are wrong about broadcasting. No one wants a government-controlled media. However, no one wants a market-dominated one either. We have to have a strong, growing public sector to reflect the diversity of our culture, the hopes and aspirations of the people and to ensure that we

have access to a wide range of high-quality materials designed to entertain, to stretch, to expand and broaden our understandings of each other and the world.

Educate

There is real job to be done alerting the public to the problem and to the solutions.

This is where committed individuals, trades unions, students and community groups can play a key role. They can organise meetings, lobby ministers and MPs and write to the local press. They can distribute copies of this pamphlet as widely as possible. Schools, colleges and universities can get involved in this as well.

Timetable

The government will publish a Green Paper early in 2005 and White Paper in the autumn of that year. This provides time to campaign and the opportunity to raise the issue, with your organisations and with MPs and policy makers. For speakers, more pamphlets and assistance in campaigning contact the CPBF:

Email us at freepress@cpbf.org.uk

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E- Activism

The World Wide Web and email have proven a valuable tool in campaigning on a whole range of issues in recent years. Using the web and email we can reach wider audiences and make sure our voice is heard – individually and collectively.

The Campaign has set up a website especially devoted to campaigning around the future of public service broadcasting. Go to our web site at www.cpb.org.uk and sign up now. We have a link on the site to FaxYourMP.

You will be kept notified of all our activities and most importantly about what you can do. In the meantime, write to the government and let them know about your concerns:

Tessa Jowell,

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

2-4 Cockspur Street, London,

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BBC: UNION WILL RESIST JOB CUTS

Journalist
01:01:2005

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Notes

Notes: The author would like to thank Jon Hardy, Gary Herman, Pat Holland, Sean Tunney and Barry White for their comments.

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The BBC is a major part of our daily lives. It entertains and informs us across radio, the internet and TV. It is a testimony to the success of the public funding of broadcasting. It is central to the development of the political and cultural life of the country. We need to build on this success to create a better, more democratic, more creative BBC in the 21st Century. The BBC's Charter was last renewed in 1996. It has to be renewed again in 2006.

This pamphlet sets out some of the reasons why you, your community group, trade union or local political party should intervene in the debate, and some ideas about what can be done.

Tom O'Malley is a member of the national council of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

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