

Rethinking the BBC

Public Media in the 21st Century

Edited by Niki Seth-Smith, Jamie Mackay and Dan Hind

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Niki Seth-Smith and Dan Hind

Foreword

Niki Seth-Smith and Dan Hind

The majority of the contributions in this book were written before Britain voted to leave the European Union. Yet its core concerns are now more pressing than ever. The media in Britain are not adequate to the task that they claim for themselves. Public debate about politics, economics and social trends is distorted by all manner of internal biases and external pressures that are themselves ignored in mainstream coverage. The preoccupations of the private media lie outside the scope of this book. But the BBC is a public institution. It is the nearest instrument to hand for those who wish to create media that presents an accurate account of the world, and that challenges the fictions to which prejudice and the lavish expenditure of money render us all vulnerable.

Starting from an insistence that the BBC belongs to the public, we have brought together a diverse range of voices, including but reaching beyond media circles and academia, to investigate what this means in the 21st century. What do we want from the BBC? And who is this 'we'?

Whatever the nature of the threat you believe the BBC is facing, we can all agree that the Corporation is facing a moment of profound self-questioning, with attendant possibilities of transformation. The Charter renewal period has coincided with intense unease within British society. The BBC is a pillar of a British establishment that stands accused of losing trust and alienating the majority. As a public broadcaster, the need for the BBC to prove its separation from the state, and to navigate what has been called a 'post-truth' climate, has never been greater. At the same time, social media are making it more and more difficult for the BBC to control the terms on which it is discussed. It has long suited the BBC to wink at the accusation, endlessly repeated in the *Daily Mail* and elsewhere, that, if it errs, it errs on the side of being too liberal and progressive. But the whole notion of balance needs careful interrogation, in light of the institution's repeated failures in its stated mission to inform.

The contributions in this book are a combination of dedicated commissions and pieces originally published into the OurBeeb section of openDemocracy. The contributors are concerned with issues of governance, representation and participation: who has the power, and who gets to speak. They ask how we can deliver public value in the rapidly shifting marketplace, how we can best use new technologies to create a digital public sphere, and

how we fund the BBC in a climate hostile to the very idea of universal provision.

There are concrete proposals here that can be fed into the Charter renewal process, and all grapple with the core issue of how to be 'public' in the 21st century. We have alternated essay-style interventions with snapshot ideas, drawn from openDemocracy's '100 Ideas for the BBC' project, so that well-known media and policy figures such as Mariana Mazzucato and Cian O'Donovan, Nick Fraser, Julian Petley and Aaqil Ahmed sit alongside voices that are heard more rarely in this debate, but are greatly needed, such as Cory Doctorow, Philip Pullman and Irenosen Okojie.

The Draft Charter was published just before this book went to press. Much had been foregrounded, and new developments have more than a whiff of the 'row-back and relief' strategy. Was the proposal for a majority of government appointees on the unitary board floated only in order to be dropped? One of the more unexpected changes has been the standing down of Rona Fairhead, following the government's decision to re-open the appointment process, raising concerns over political influence on who becomes the new BBC chair. So the chess pieces have been moved around, but the game looks very similar.

We hope that this book, by drawing together some of the best and most interesting thinkers, writers and practitioners around the question 'what do we want from the BBC', will focus minds on how the Corporation can move away from attempting to serve the masses, and respond to an ever-louder demand: for the public to be brought into the heart of the establishment.

1: The BBC belongs to us

‘The BBC belongs to the public’. An article of faith to many, yet this is no straightforward assertion, as the following chapters show. In his chapter, which is an open submission to the BBC Charter consultation, Anthony Barnett calls for end to the “the era of paternalism” and for “professionalism and democracy in action”. It is an engagement with a huge and multi-layered Charter review public consultation process, based around the three main consultations by the BBC Trust and the government that took place in 2015-2016, yet it also exposes the limitations of such a process. This section takes a look beyond this superficial effort at accountability, to explore how we might achieve a more genuine kind of ownership by the people. Is such a model of ownership achievable?

Crucial to this is the BBC’s autonomy from the state. Richard Tait’s chapter is a sharp warning on the importance of ensuring the future of BBC governance does not lead to further erosion of the Corporation’s independence, while Justin Schlosberg argues for a ‘networked BBC’, proposing this as an answer to the perennial problem of resisting both government and market pressures, by adopting something more like the Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO) in Holland.

Writing from a US perspective, Nicholas Mirzeoff invites ‘Auntie Beeb’ to move on from the old reign of Top Gear and British Bake Off to the ‘new British popular’ embodied by a variety of new political developments, from Jeremy Corbyn to the movement for Scottish independence. Claire Westall and Michael Gardiner, on the other hand, argue that the BBC has always been a state broadcaster, from its beginnings as a vehicle for claims to neutrality deemed necessary to sustain the Empire, to today.

Interspersed amongst the chapters we have a series of snapshot ideas that point towards the goal of “democracy in action”. Jeremy Gilbert says nothing less than an elected Director-General will do, Stella Duffy dares the BBC to see what happens if they turn programming over to the people, and Deborah Bull proposes a radical re-branding. Isn’t the very name ‘British Broadcasting Corporation’ increasingly inappropriate?

What would an autonomous BBC look like?

Justin Schlosberg

Contrary to widespread expectations and fears, the government's recent White Paper on BBC Charter Renewal did not propose a giant sell-off or switch to subscription funding, or an end to the BBC's unique public service mandate as we know it. Though the door remains open to these pathways in the future, public ownership and licence fee funding seem to have been temporarily secured.

A much more worrying development, however, concerns proposed changes to the BBC's governance and a system of appointments that threatens encroachment on the BBC's editorial autonomy.

Increased state control?

What's particularly striking about this development is that it pushes in the general direction of growing state control of public service media, spearheaded by countries like Hungary and Poland. A new media law that came into effect in Poland earlier this year, for instance, consolidates the executive's power of appointments in public broadcasters. It was one of the first legislative moves of the new government led by the right wing Law and Justice Party. As Reporters without Borders declared earlier this year:

This new law, giving the government full powers to appoint and dismiss the heads of the public broadcast media, constitutes a flagrant violation of media freedom and pluralism.

The White Paper proposes a new 'unitary board' of which the majority and most senior members will be appointed by government, [as Richard Tait describes in more detail in his chapter](#). For the first time in its history, such an approach threatens to give a direct government appointee overall editorial responsibility for all of the BBC's output.

What's equally striking about this move, is that it flies in the face of what the government has long intimated was at the heart of its Charter Renewal agenda: introducing a system of contestable funding to effectively break up the BBC and enable more local and more commercial providers to take a slice of the licence fee. Understandably, that struck fear in the minds of those who rightly believe that the BBC must remain entirely in public hands and entirely not-for-profit.

But defensive arguments against top-slicing tend to oppose any possibility of decentralisation in the BBC's structure and governance, and assume that the BBC's strength lies in its scale and unitary composition. This is assumed to provide a robust defence against both government and market pressures, but there is more reason to think that the exact opposite is the case. A centralised and concentrated BBC is intrinsically more vulnerable to editorial pressures precisely because they can filter down the chain of governors, directors, managers and editors. If a government did seek to shape or control the BBC's agenda, it would have a far more difficult job if it had to contend with a network of editorially autonomous outlets than with a single command and control centre.

Such a network need not involve any degree of privatisation or commercialisation. Indeed, a 'networked' BBC – provided it was structured in the right way – could also be more immune to market pressures that many believe have fostered homogenisation of the BBC's news output and a growing dependency on a commercial-press led agenda.

Towards a networked BBC

So what would such a networked structure look like? As it turns out, we don't have to look much further than our own national doorstep for an example. The Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO) in Holland has long been founded on just such a system that distributes airtime and resources among a network of affiliate and member-led broadcasting organisations. Holland was ranked the second freest media system in the world by Reporters without Borders in 2016 and although it has faced recent cutbacks and consolidation, the NPO has proved relatively resilient to the pressures of digitisation. Like the BBC, it continues to demonstrate enduring public value, as reflected in the strength of its member-based affiliates and the reach of its online services.

The bulk of channels and airtime assigned to NPO is shared among ten broadcasting associations. Eight of these function as audience cooperatives, with membership bases that reflect the diversity of interests and groups in Dutch society. The remaining two are 'task-based' broadcasters specialising predominantly in news, current affairs and other factual programming. The NPO is charged with administering this network but does not have overall editorial responsibility for output.

With editorial autonomy thus enshrined into its structure, and accountability to audiences cemented by membership-driven governance, the NPO is intrinsically independent in a way that the BBC never has been, from its compromised reporting of the General Strike in 1926 ([See Part 3, Chapter 3 by Tom Mills](#)) to its infamous capitulation in the face of government

flak over the Iraq War in 2003.

If such an alternative sounds unthinkable radical, that only reflects how restricted the terms of public debate over the BBC's future have become. Indeed, the very words 'radical' and 'reform' in the context of the BBC have been so co-opted that they seem to automatically signal cuts or closure rather than any kind of progressive enhancement of the BBC's public service function.

Of course there is always the danger that even consideration of a reconfigured BBC along networked lines – which could take any number of forms – could open a backdoor route to privatisation or top slicing. But if anything, the government's White Paper for Charter Renewal takes a step in the opposite direction and reveals its true hand: in spite of the rhetoric, a large scale, centralised BBC has always been more consonant with the interests of state-corporate power than it is in conflict, notwithstanding periodic headaches and crises engendered by a few pesky journalists.

Of course a much more outspoken critique focuses precisely on the BBC's size and scale which is seen as the major threat to media plurality in the UK. From this perspective, the decline of newspapers threatens to erode any checks on the near monopoly status enjoyed by the BBC. Rather than worrying about the agenda influence of mainstream media in general, these arguments suggest that we should be concerned exclusively with the overarching reach and influence of the BBC.

A false binary

But how far does the BBC's own news agenda reflect or align with that of its commercial competitors? When scholars at Cardiff University¹ set out to investigate this question during the 2015 UK general election, they found that the BBC's overall issue-agenda appeared to have been consistently led by the predominantly right-wing national newspapers. The extent of this alignment was corroborated by other research conducted at Loughborough University² and by the Media Standards Trust,³ revealing a strong correlation between the range and rank order of issues covered by both television and the press, and one that did not fully accord with public priorities as demonstrated by monthly issue tracking polls.

The important point this raises for the future of the BBC is twofold. First, if commercial press exercise a strong influence over the BBC's political news coverage, it makes little sense to consider it a meaningful counterweight to the BBC's dominance of news consumption. The evidence from the 2015 election suggests that if anything, the BBC amplified an agenda that

was set largely by the commercial press. Second, and by the same token, we ought to be equally sceptical of suggestions that the BBC provides a substantive check on the more partisan editorial agenda of the commercial press.

At a time when many public service broadcasters around the world are facing varying degrees of existential crises, public debate is all too often reduced to a choice between preservation or market-based reforms; with the latter usually amounting to cutbacks or closures. What's left off the agenda is the possibility of radical democratic reform aimed at reconstituting the independence and accountability of public service media. The idea that a substantive section of any pluralistic media system needs to be in public hands is one that retains a great deal of force, in spite of the digital transition and corresponding end of channel scarcity. But the way in which public service broadcasters are structured, regulated and governed can have profound implications for independence in relation to both the state and market.

Justin Schlosberg is a media activist, researcher and lecturer based at Birkbeck, University of London. He is the current chair of the Media Reform Coalition and author of *Media Ownership and Agenda Control: The Hidden Limits of the Information Age* (Routledge, forthcoming November 2016).

Consider a name change

Deborah Bull

It's impossible to imagine conceiving of the BBC from now, from scratch. It's like most precious resources: developed in ways no one could have planned or foreseen, through happy accident, natural (and unnatural) forces and the passage of time. By and large, the BBC has evolved in response to the various social, technological, economic and cultural shifts of the last 90 years while keeping its eyes firmly fixed on the admirable Reithian ambition to inform, educate and entertain. Is it what you'd design, if you were building it now? Probably not, but that's no reason to dismantle it.

But here's an idea: consider a name change. Unthinkable perhaps, but at the centre of the 'British Broadcasting Corporation' is broadcast, and that's just one part of what we value about the BBC. Broadcast, by definition, is one-to-many. It implies a hierarchy of voices, like a preacher at the pulpit. This democratic, anti-authoritarian and digital age has turned that hierarchy on its side. Communication these days means many-to-many, and in many combinations. The BBC may have started out as a broadcaster, but it has become much more than that: it's part of the national conversation, a modern day agora where different voices and different views are given equal weight; it's a vital part of the cultural and creative ecosystem; and it's an innovator that must be allowed both to fail and to capitalise (on our behalf) on the risks that pay off.

What's in a name? It should be all of the above. Best of British Culture? Brave, Brilliant, Curious? Big British Conversation? The BBC it will surely remain, but perhaps those three familiar letters can be hijacked to describe the BBC as something much more than a corporation that broadcasts.

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Saving the BBC from itself

Anthony Barnett

The following was submitted to the BBC Charter consultation process in October 2015.

Dear Secretary of State for Culture,

Thank you for your consultation. The following is my formal submission to the consultation process.

The BBC is under threat as never before. So too is Britain itself and the two threats are connected. A decennial Charter renewal process for the BBC is now underway as the Green Paper consultation comes to a close. The government insists that the BBC is highly valued and will be preserved. But everyone who values public service broadcasting is right to be alarmed, for the very meaning of ‘the public’ and with it who we are in the British Isles as a people, is in play.

The danger is that the BBC will become, in your own words, just the source of “things that are in the public interest to have that would probably not be viable on a commercial basis”, as Charlotte Higgins⁴ has reported. Such a residual preservation will prove terminal for the spirit of the BBC, making it a heritage institution, a legacy broadcaster cut back from the expanding world of the internet and broken as a ‘universal’ provider. This will not be a small mercy for which we should be grateful; it would be a fate worse than death that will enslave us to the market without escape. It should be resisted at all costs.

The difficulty about trying to help save the BBC, however, especially with so much at stake, is the need to save it from itself: to prevent it from carrying on being the BBC, with its waste, its white Oxbridge presumptions and recruitment, its servility to the security state, its obsession with its own narrative.

The starting point has to be not with the BBC but with the fact that so many of us want to save BBC from itself. There is a huge desire for what it *can do*, as you can see from the 100 ideas for the BBC that openDemocracy is publishing. Just a quick scroll through the wealth of proposals and possibilities, attitudes and advances, content ideas and suggestions for how it is run, makes a profound impression. There is an urge for it to “hold its ground” in the

words of [Ian McEwan](#), not passively but as a force for good. People do not relate to the BBC as yet another provider; they want it to do better as if it is their home team. Because it *is* our home team, especially in a world of ‘global’ corporations. We may despair of it, we may despise the *Today* programme for good reasons, but we urge the BBC to improve and be more open in a way we never would something that was not *ours*.

As my submission to the Green Paper consultation, therefore, I want to focus on this all-important relationship, I want the government to conclude that there is a need for more BBC not less, that it needs to become of greater importance and not be confined, that it should be challenged to help shape the digital medium in a way that builds on the public, democratic, deliberative potential of the web, and not in its old way, with its ‘establishment’ voice. The era of paternalism is over. The alternative to Reithian paternalism is not populism and certainly not false, nervous populism: it is professionalism and democracy in action.

How can such a centralised top-down institution be democratic? More important, how is it even possible to suggest such a thing, isn’t it like suggesting that the monarchy become democratic! It can more accessible, for sure, it can exchange a frock coat for jeans, but isn’t it intrinsically beyond such a reform?

No, it isn’t, for two reasons: First, the BBC is not a nineteenth century mandarin institution, it does not belong to the age of Victorian monarchy. Unlike those nineteenth century structures of privilege, which arguably were created to keep the hoi polloi at arms length, the Corporation was from its founding moment, as Bill Thompson has observed, a “technology platform”. More than what it did, what mattered was what it was: a new medium. From the start it generated new relations with the public. It created radio across Britain. Then it created television in the UK. As the Empire shrunk and the navy declined and sterling fell, the BBC could not help but grow enormously with these public platforms. For unlike the nineteenth century institutions of the British State to which it owed so much in the way it was run, from the start it was fully involved with the modern public. This has turned it into a multi-billion pound network. Which in turn is why the potential for change and democracy are built into it (emphasis on potential). In a long exchange with OurBeeb in 2012, Richard Eyre⁵ described how the Corporation used to be run as if it was a military establishment, but that what it created could be quite different in its truthfulness and reach. This is thanks to the medium not the institution Today, the medium of broadcasting is again being transformed. But this time by a medium, the internet, and within the internet the web, which the BBC has not created – and one which is interactive and where users create their own searches, preferences, pages, networks. As Thompson argues, this presents the BBC with a

transformative challenge. To survive as a central provider it has to rise to the platform challenge. This cannot be rooted in the values of the state so it must be grounded in the values of a reflective public – a democratic transition that may be beyond the UK's Empire State itself because of its formation, but is not beyond the BBC.

The second reason we can seek 'more BBC' in the sense of a more democratic BBC is that it is trusted. A democrat needs to respect this trust. I am not saying that anyone trusts any particular thing the BBC says. But there is a shared trust in it, perhaps even more abroad than here in across Britain where a healthy cynicism cohabits alongside belief in the BBC. This trust has three aspects. First, it is trusted more than politicians; who naturally hate it for this. Second, it is trusted because it is not seen as trying to screw us for its own profit or gain; Rupert Murdoch hates it especially for this, as does the *Mail*, the *Telegraph* etc. Third, it is trusted because the British trust themselves in a way that people in most other countries do not.

For me this is the message of the 100 ideas, they show there is a culture of self-belief that supports the role of a non-commercial British broadcaster and which is open-minded and creative.⁶ This makes it possible for more of the BBC to mean a different BBC not more of the same: 'more' meaning more expansive, touching more people, being regarded as 'ours' more intensively and by a wider public. Which is the key reason why its role as a provider of mass entertainment is so important. It is show business! Without this it can't retain a democratic claim. It has to reach out to everyone, to be appreciated as more than specialist or it cannot be a democratic institution.

The manner in which it needs to grow is changing profoundly as the way we define ourselves is being transformed by the digital era. The world is no longer singular in the way it was, it is both more unified and more plural. This is most discomfiting for an institution like the BBC, which sought to impose an accountable narrative. As one of its employees said to me, and not just in jest, this is why the BBC is obsessed with Dr Who. The Tardis, the police box that is also a communications hub, is a metaphor for Broadcasting House and Dr Who a stand in for the "DG", sent out across all possible zones, planets and universes, to create a narrative while prescribing wisdom and good judgement to younger females through exciting times; putting a singular, corrective stamp on time and space wherever it might be. Apparently Tardis stands for Time And Relative Dimension In Space. This has now met its match in Google. Whereas the BBC was the begetter of radio and television in the UK, it is now merely a participant in the world of the web. The singular narrative form no longer provides authority.

Its response should be to seek to be a provider of a new kind. The announcement that the BBC wants to become an open platform providing access to other public service content suggests it is capable of embracing the kind of change when more BBC means less of only the BBC.

Just as its broadcasting needs to be more energetically open, so too does its ownership need to become public: the Trust should be a mutual, the Board selected at least in part by lot, the Corporation becoming literally as well as rhetorically answerable to members of the public, ending for good its military-type structures of command, answerable in the end to her Majesty's Government.

The need for the BBC to treat us as citizens not consumers should be built into it, so that it feels in its marrow no longer entitled to broadcast to us as its subjects,

This puts the issue of the BBC's structure and governance in constitutional language. Rightly so, because the BBC is now part of the country's informal constitution. This is not a comfortable place to be at present. It is the British Broadcasting Corporation but what does it mean to be British? The question is finally being asked in traditional quarters. The current Marquess of Salisbury, Robert Cecil, whose forebears have played a role in high politics since Elizabeth the First, has spotted the writing on the wall. A passionate Unionist, he personally argues for an honourable settlement with Scotland and grasps this must mean a federal solution for the UK, ideally by making the Commons the English Parliament and replacing the Lords with an elected British federal chamber. He recently convened a Constitutional Reform Group that has issued an authoritative report.⁷ He justified his approach in the *Sunday Times* on 1 March saying, "I... believe that the purpose of the Tory party is to stand for the nation state and its institutions. Normally, this means that we Tories believe only in necessary evolutionary change. However, once in several centuries, the true Tory must accept that the nation demands more radical solutions if it is to survive. This is one of those times."

So it is. For what Cecil has grasped is that any British Union today has to be more than a mere union, it must be federal or it will not survive in the longer term. This is the framework within which the BBC is also fighting for its life. It is under attack from those who wish to support commercial and corporate interests that would dissolve our capacity to act collectively through self-determination. It is a pressure that would be firmly resisted if we as a country knew who we were. But the old Britain that created the BBC is itself dissolving. Where then is the ground on which to build the values and objectives for the BBC?

The answer is that the ground is us, the people. You have called the Green Paper consultation “Your BBC”. Thank you for this. It permits us to claim it as Our BBC. Can the BBC manage to “let go” sufficiently to trust the public? Will you, Secretary of State, permit and encourage it, with all your powers? If so, we can have a public broadcaster open to all, inventive and self-confident, democratic rather than paternalistic, in the way it is run and in the way it commissions content and, critically, shares its platforms.

We therefore need a universal BBC. Universal in a different way to the manner in which it has exercised its reach up till now, but nonetheless reaching out to everyone. This must mean as an entertainer as well as an educator and source of information and also as an enabler working for us not the surveillance state. By “us” I mean the different publics of the UK, hence the need for it to become an open platform. There is a politics to this, it is the politics of assisting us to learn how to govern ourselves, as we share our music, our humour, our intelligence, and experience across a digital public space of quality and distinction.

*

The editors have kindly allowed me to add a short after-Brexit note. The referendum result was a disaster for what the BBC stood for; an internationally confident, British-government-knows-best culture was bested by Brexit. The lesson: they should have listened to those of us who argued that without a new constitutional settlement rooted in consent the country’s institutions will increasingly lack self-belief and become residual in a fast changing world. Had the constitution and the BBC along with it been democratised we would still be in the European Union.

In describing the BBC as “residual” I am following Raymond Williams’ taxonomy of governing ideologies and institutions. They can be emergent, dominant or residual, he argued. All three types of power and influence co-exist at the same time, but with their different dynamics. Brexit has confirmed that the governing framework within which the BBC is embedded has become residual. The mantra of Leave was “restore traditional sovereignty.” In fact it dynamited it. The dominant ideology now is a market one hostile to public service democracy. If the BBC is to have a dynamic and creative future it must become part of an emergent democratic response to marketisation. For it is only democracy that can protect us from authoritarian populism.

September, 2016

*

Anthony Barnett is the co-founder of openDemocracy and was its first Editor-in-Chief from 2001 to 2006. An activist and writer he was the first director of Charter 88, the campaign for a democratic British constitution from 1988 to 1995. His books include *Iron Britannia*, *Soviet Freedom*, *The Athenian Option* (with Peter Carty), and the openDemocracy E-Book, *Blimey, it could be Brexit!* He is currently writing *What Next: Britain after Brexit*.

Introduce democracy and an elected DG

Jeremy Gilbert



know it. We know it. The BBC's enemies know it, and will use it against them with lethal effect if they can. The solution which those enemies will continue to offer is creeping roll-back of public-service broadcasting in favour of the sham-democracy of the market. The only effective response to this, in the long-run, can be to resist that sham with real democracy.

The Director-General should be directly elected, albeit with a long enough term of office to make proper planning possible. The Trust should be replaced by a federated democratic government. The corporation should use techniques such as [Dan Hind's public commissioning model](#) to actually open out and democratise the editorial process itself.

Absolutely none of this democratisation need come at the expense of the BBC's artistic integrity, experimental courage, public-minded seriousness or widespread popularity. Only the crassest, most hidebound elitist could still really believe that giving its audiences ownership over its processes could do anything but strengthen the content of the BBC's output.

This isn't utopianism. In the age of YouTube, it is the only way for a public-service broadcaster on the scale of the BBC to retain the popular legitimacy that it needs.

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On the new British 'popular'

Nicholas Mirzoeff

I grew up in a BBC family in London. Now I work in the media studies department at NYU. So I know the kind of piece I'm expected to write here—self-deprecating about the US media landscape, wistful about the fading glories of the BBC, concluding with a call to change the BBC while defending it. And that was my first draft. But precisely because the BBC was so important to me, I can't leave it at that.

After forty years of market-dominated governance from Labour and Tory alike, the role of the 'left' has become, as David Graeber has insightfully described in his book *The Utopia of Rules*,⁸ to defend bureaucracy. In the United States, it's Social Security, Medicare and Roe vs. Wade. In the case of Britain, it's the NHS and the BBC. As a political strategy, it's not going so well. I watch the BBC programmes still aimed at people like me in the age of Ant and Dec with pleasure, but it's time to think past always defending bureaucracies, even ones that make *Dr Who*.

What worries me is not just the renewed Thatcherism of the current government, much as I oppose all its works, but what I want to call Savile-ism, after the sexual predator who assaulted at least 117 people on BBC premises. Thatcherism saw itself as an attack on the London-based establishment, including the BBC. Savile was a friend and supporter of Mrs Thatcher and on the first page of his 1974 autobiography declared that he liked to 'pee on the establishment'. The Thatcherite credo 'there is no such thing as society' enabled an odd crossover of celebrities and politicians to treat people as prey.

Everything connected to the name 'Jimmy Savile' now means the breakdown of the illusion that institutions like the BBC embodied a cross-party consensus, beyond day-to-day politics, about what it means to be British. Former PR hack David Cameron was reaching for this with his slogan: 'We're all in this together'. The reality of Thatcherism is precisely the opposite.

Savile-ism has made it painfully clear that Thatcher's purported attack on the establishment was always a nasty fix for the benefit of the new elite produced by global finance and celebrity culture. Different national cultures are still producing different versions of this anti-establishment establishment. We have the misogynist racist Donald Trump. You have Boris. We both have a problem.

The Britishness of British Broadcasting

What does the BBC stand for now? What does it mean to be 'British' in these days of devolution, independence and Brexit? What is 'broadcasting' in the age of iPlayer, Netflix, YouTube and Hulu?

And let's not even get started on corporations. For all the virtues of a public-service broadcaster, which I do not dismiss in any way, these questions suggest that the BBC is already in an impossible position. Perhaps that's why no one on *W1A* can ever finish a sentence—they don't know what to say. And let's acknowledge at once that only the BBC could so wickedly and accurately parody itself.

That self-confidence is backed up by the 'golden age' of British television, that people are now uniting to defend. Savile's awfulness seems a long way from this important BBC of drama and documentary. Searching to back up that idea, I looked up the Wikipedia entry for *Play for Today*, a classic BBC product, which created social realist television drama. Sure enough, in its 1970-84 run, playwrights like Denis Potter, Ian McEwan and Stephen Frears contributed important work. But on second glance, although one of the long-term producers was Irene Shubik, every writer and director mentioned was a man, and, to the best of my knowledge, a white man at that.

The Britishness at the heart of the BBC has always really meant white, male Englishness, even when it's criticising that Englishness. In *W1A*, Lucy Freeman (Nina Sosanya) is endlessly frustrated by the BBC but she's never allowed to say anything about race, let alone racism. It's Siobhan (Jessica Sharpe) who complains that Wimbledon is too white.

The Condition of *Top Gear*

Let's go to the heart of that whiteness: *Top Gear*. The motoring show began in 1977, closely followed by Stuart Hall's classic essay⁹ on Thatcherism, "The Great Moving Right Show." *Top Gear* was a half-hour programme about white men driving cars. Tony Blair, Mrs Thatcher's true heir, later said that he always tried to keep in mind what he called 'Ford Mondeo man' as the path to office. In that sense, *Top Gear* was literally the great moving right show.

Revived in 2002 and extended to a full hour, *Top Gear* became astonishingly successful worldwide. By 2008, 350 million people in 20 countries watched it.¹⁰ BBC America devotes an entire day a week to the programme. In this version, *Top Gear* is for blokes. Since 2006, its lad culture has veered into nastiness, meaning that it was quite often homophobic, got as close to racism as it could and didn't mind causing trouble. The same BBC that never noticed Jimmy Savile always had an excuse or a way to minimize these incidents. It had already become Savile-ist .R

Although the worst offender, presenter Jeremy Clarkson, was finally fired, *Top Gear* once again got itself into trouble in March 2016 for filming *Friends* star Matt LeBlanc doing donuts at the Cenotaph. And that of course is precisely why *Top Gear* did it. Here was yet another chance to offend that very establishment whose political correctness they so detest.

#Popular

Jeremy Clarkson has now taken his version of *Top Gear* to Amazon. Not so long ago, he would have disappeared into the storm and fury of the Internet. Not any more. The Internet has all the power of television without a controlling establishment. It connected #BlackLivesMatter as the most resonant social movement in the United States since the '60s. Now it has fueled the resurgence of white supremacy behind Presidential candidate Donald Trump.

The BBC has long been a leader online with its extensive website and iPlayer. For Mrs Thatcher's former political secretary turned Culture Secretary, John Whittingdale, it looked like a perfect target for cuts or privatization. He's cleverly reached for it by asserting that a public service broadcaster does not need to aspire for universal approval, as if making an argument for quality. By contrast, BBC One controller Charlotte Moore has defended the broadcaster as 'unashamedly popular.' Like Jimmy Savile? That may seem unfair but Moore claims that 'BBC One helps make Britain great. It unites us as a nation around big, shared moments and events,' and she means *Strictly* and *Bake Off* here, even if that last one did get away.¹¹ What limits are there on that claim to audience?

What Stuart Hall called 'active popular consent' in 1979 has been central to Thatcherism from the beginning. It's under tension now between the populism of the xenophobic tabloids; establishment pro-Europeanism; and the attempt to create a state-sanctioned broadcaster. Whittingdale even criticized the BBC for 'pro-Brussels bias'¹² as part of his effort to change its governance, which might have hampered its journalism during the European referendum.

Here, then, is the discussion we should be having. Not whether BBC content is "distinctive" but what does it mean to be popular? Who are the people, in other words? There is a clear opportunity here between the 'whatever the most people will watch' approach of the BBC and 'the market is the popular' mantra of the government. There's a new 'popular' in town, one that involves the SNP, devolution, and Jeremy Corbyn, paralleled in the US with #BlackLivesMatter and Bernie Sanders. How can this popular find a media voice? Can it compete with the right-wing populism of Le Pen, Trump and the Alternative for Germany? And can the BBC help?

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Turn over programming and curation to the people

Stella Duffy



It is time for the BBC to move away from the Reithian idea of being the teacher of the nation and acknowledge that the nation is now perfectly capable of teaching itself.

The theatre director Joan Littlewood said ‘Everyone an artist or a scientist’. In Fun Palaces,¹³ our 21st-century incarnation of the (never-built) Fun Palace idea she envisioned with Cedric Price, we say ‘Everyone an artist, everyone a scientist’. We believe in everyday artists and citizen scientists.

We can empower ourselves, we can enable ourselves, and we can – together – make a difference in our everyday lives.

We can choose to use culture, not as an adjunct to or a getaway from the ordinary, but as the base of the extraordinary. Sciences and arts ask who are we, what are we, what is humanity, and where is our place in the world, in the universe? Ordinary people, everyday people, are far better placed to answer this question than celebrities, who have too much to hide, and experts, who have too much to lose.

Let’s turn over programming and curation to the people. Let’s ask the people what they’re passionate about. Let’s not have it presented or edited or otherwise channelled for us, let’s trust the people to speak to the people (nation shall speak peace unto nation). Be it for merely one hour, or one day, or one week – across the whole BBC – let’s give the BBC back to the people. I bet they make something wonderful.

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Independence Day for the BBC?

Richard Tait

Brexit is actually far worse news for those commercial rivals than it is for the apparently beleaguered Corporation. In the current context, Lord Hall's much criticised licence fee deal last year now looks a pretty shrewd bargain – while all UK broadcasters will struggle with the impact of the devaluation of sterling and potential recession, only the BBC has a guaranteed, inflation-proof, income for the next five years, protecting it at least from the forecast rise in RPI.

The main commercial broadcasters, on the other hand, are facing a significant drop in advertising income – Claire Enders of Enders Analysis recently told the Lords Select Committee on Communications that it could be as much as five to ten per cent.¹⁴ At the same time rising inflation and the weakness of sterling will put pressure on their production and acquisition costs. The slump in the share price of ITV, one of the great UK media success stories of the last few years, tells you everything you need to know about where that may end. But if the BBC is (comparatively) insulated from the economic fallout from Brexit, there is still some crucial unfinished business to be settled around the Charter.

The most important issue is governance and the BBC's independence – which still hangs in the balance. The erosion of the BBC's independence over the last Charter period had been relentless – top slicing of the licence fee to fund government pet projects; two indefensible licence fee settlements where the public interest was noticeably absent; and a flawed governance system imposed on the BBC against its wishes at the end of the last Charter renewal process which left the BBC's ability to defend itself weakened by confusion over who was really in charge and which contributed to a series of pretty catastrophic management mistakes. At the same time the licence was cut in real terms each year, while commercial rivals continued to grow.¹⁵

Sir David Clementi's review came up with a sensible proposed new structure for the BBC – a unitary Board to run the Corporation and an external regulator (Ofcom) to regulate it. Even those of us who would have preferred a bespoke regulator accepted his proposals as a workable solution and far better than the hapless Trust. The crucial issue is: who

appoints the members of that powerful new unitary Board? Clementi envisaged a Board with, as a minimum, a majority of independent members appointed by the BBC itself – six to seven non-executives and two to three executives out of a Board of 14 to 15. The report sets out two options for the appointment of the rest of the Board: ‘a specially devised system which is independent in all respects’ or ‘appointment by the government, subject to certain safeguards’.

Clementi set out his safeguards if the government chose the second option. The chair and deputy chair would be appointed from a very short shortlist and subject to parliamentary scrutiny: the other four board members, representing the interests of the Nations and the English Regions would be appointed by the government both for their relevant expertise and for their understanding of the issues in the Nations and English Regions. The politics of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are so different from those of Westminster that Clementi envisaged assessors from the nations having a role in the appointments.¹⁶ The government duly went for this option in the White Paper.¹⁷

In his evidence to the House of Commons culture committee in June, the BBC’s director-general Tony Hall accepted that the government was going to appoint the six – and put his faith in a public appointments system that he hoped would provide independent-minded people with the right skills.¹⁸ The committee members were less sanguine about escaping government interference – they had had an uncomfortable argument in an earlier session with John Whittingdale, the former culture secretary, over what some of the committee saw as his interference in an appointment at the National Portrait Gallery.¹⁹

John Whittingdale argued that because the new BBC board would have no editorial role pre-transmission, there was no threat to BBC independence. The Charter would make explicit the convention that the director general is editor-in-chief and the Board only gets involved in programme matters after the programme has been broadcast. While this is a useful safeguard, its value should not be exaggerated. In practice, no BBC Board has intervened pre-transmission since the disastrous decision of the Governors in 1985 to pull a controversial documentary – *Real Lives: At the Edge of Union* – under pressure from Margaret Thatcher and her government. That BBC Board was notoriously packed by the government of the day with people of a similar point of view to it and went on in 1987 to fire the director-general, Alasdair Milne, after years of miserable conflict between the Board and the management. Even so, when I was on the BBC Board from 2004 to 2010, the Governors and later the Trustees found themselves lobbied strongly on occasions to

intervene ahead of transmission – on the controversial *Jerry Springer The Opera*, for example – and had to remind themselves why, although theoretically they could, that it was a terrible idea.

But even if it does not intervene ahead of transmission, the new Board will have a big say in editorial policy – through the complaints system, the editorial guidelines and the general processes of review and budget allocation. On top of that, the new structure will give Ofcom the final word on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's journalism. So far, Ofcom has proved itself to be an effective, independent and fair-minded regulator of commercial broadcasting – but regulating the BBC is a much bigger and more fraught job and Ofcom will find its staff (and its own, government-appointed, Board) under far more pressure and scrutiny.

And the proposed structure leaves the BBC with a Board with some potentially very dangerous fault lines – between non-executives chosen (by the BBC) for their expertise and independence and those chosen (by the politicians via the public appointments process) for what might be seen as their political acceptability. Given the complexities of post-devolution politics, you could also envisage tensions between the political appointees from the Nations and the political appointees from the Westminster government. Although there is general agreement that the non-executives representing the Nations should not be 'shop stewards', lobbying for their part of the UK, that may be easier said than achieved.

The only positive development in recent weeks has been the decision to allow the current Trust chair, Rona Fairhead, to continue as chair of the new unitary board. We should all wish her and Peter Riddell, the new Commissioner for Public Appointments, the very best of luck in ensuring – through these crucial board appointments which will need to be made over the next few months – that the BBC retains what really makes it, as the White Paper promises, distinctive – the fact that it is a public, rather than a state, broadcaster.

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Think beyond the living room

Irenosen Okojie

¹The BBC's impact could stretch beyond light programming, news and being an



entertainment channel. It could create shifts in perception and mobilise people, revolutionise how a channel can operate beyond the perceived constraints of its medium.

I'm more interested in what the BBC can do outside living room spaces, aside from the distracting, momentary consumption of Saturday night TV.

There is room for a channel to be more radical in its approach. With its global standing, the BBC could empower communities and young people. It has access to some of the world's great thinkers. It could produce its own alternative to TED and TEDX, putting some of the power back in the hands of people at local levels to discuss global issues that matter, thereby giving them a certain onus in the process, rather than individuals paying for a licence fee and feeling excluded from decisions that directly affect them.

With the sad demise of many youth centres, it could provide state of the art hubs around the country for young people, where they can learn everything from music production to jiu jitsu, essentially helping to cull some of the boredom, apathy and disenfranchisement affecting youths in Britain today. There is a major issue with libraries disappearing. This is a travesty and cause for alarm. The BBC could bridge the gap in struggling boroughs by providing mobile library services or digital options.

In a world where the next iPhone product is eagerly anticipated, who are Britain's answer to the likes of Steve Jobs? There should be investment in a platform for inventors and programmes to encourage more young women to get into the sciences. Research and funding could go into providing an accessible, affordable space travel program. The BBC should create a channel that exists both 'on the box' and

¹ Picture credit: David Kwaw Mensah

beyond the box. What happens when a channel becomes more than just a television channel and begins to evolve and intersect the lives of its users? Orwellian? Possibly but it's also potentially quite an interesting concept to explore.

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The BBC, neutrality, and British branding

Michael Gardiner and Claire Westall

The BBC, as the voice of Britain, is periodically described as under some kind of overwhelming threat. The latest is the vote to leave the EU, coming during the Charter renewal period and at a time when the government's White Paper is already presented as an attack. Yet an altered relationship to Europe will not fundamentally change the BBC. This is because the BBC is, by and large, a commonwealth institution: an institution that since the mid-twentieth century has been tasked with 'culturing' the neutrality of empire. Similarly, claims that the government wants to 'privatise' the BBC are overstated, primarily because the corporation's authoritative access to a vocabulary of neutrality is crucial for the maintenance of the British state and its power base at home and abroad. We don't expect this to change post-Brexit (whatever this term comes to mean) or during the next Charter period.

The history of the BBC shows a long-term pattern of presenting threats to neutrality in order to galvanise greater efforts of protection. The government White Paper on the BBC is a case in point. Des Freedman described the 'two-step' government strategy as 'Apocalyptic rumours followed by a row-back and relief'²⁰, and Nick Higham explained that little 'will change fundamentally'.²¹ But the White Paper triggered demands to defend the BBC's independence and neutrality, with the BAFTA awards ceremony immediately following its release becoming a role-call of celebrity protest along these lines. Peter Kosminsky, the director of *Wolf Hall*, protested against the White Paper by listing a number of well-worn and misleading assertions: 'the BBC's main job is to speak truth to power'; it is 'a public broadcaster – independent of government – not a state broadcaster'; it is 'not their BBC, it's your BBC.'²²

In this chapter we argue that the BBC certainly is a state broadcaster, but one whose power derives from its ability to distance itself from the 'core' of state using a language of neutrality it claims to be common and natural, and so unimpeachable in a way that differs from mere national propaganda or indeed mere politics. The 'unbiased' ideal actually becomes the talismanic centre of a whole new industry of neutrality-production – one that is central to the British mission.

Period drama and public memory

As well as the cachet of historical dramas such as *Wolf Hall* and their relationship with the heritage industry, the BBC's ideology of neutrality allows it to make peculiarly total claims on public memory. It is only through a particular embeddedness in state machinery that BBC documentaries and dramas can claim their own dramatisations of history as simply history. BBC documentary histories now commonly present their own footage as the memory of the time without any acknowledgment that a mediation has taken place. Dominic Sandbrook's series on *The 70s*, for example, illustrates the move from beer to wine with a scene from *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* as if it were documentary footage²³.

Moreover, the 'envy of the world' that Kosminsky describes is an envy of the way the BBC can leverage its own apparent neutrality and impartiality for concrete foreign policy ends – something crucial in an era when heritage forms a major UK export. The BBC is a virtual monopoly broker of heritage. In order to function as such, it must sell a story of history licensed by the wide state that can claim some degree of participation by the people it claims as the public. Since heritage is subject to competition in the wider world, the BBC constantly has to be saved by a public who love it – a public that it creates, narrates, manages and perpetually calls to its defence. Indeed, the BBC has to be seen as 'ours', as being loved and protected by 'the public', and remain the subject of a defence that both defines 'we', the British, and generates value internationally.

Images of public togetherness are critical to BBC output and its state-bound conception of British self-understanding. The double celebration of 2012, with the Golden Jubilee and London Olympics, provide a set of object lessons in recuperating images of public togetherness as heritage to generate profit. The claim in the Olympic opening ceremony that 'this is for everyone' is tracked by a licence fee, which must be simultaneously universal and perform itself as voluntary on the level of the public (despite being legally compulsory for people). And it follows that the BBC reported a rise in 'foreign programme sales' after this double celebration because British heritage outputs were the main attractions of the Jubilympic summer.²⁴

Neutrality, moreover, is itself a central theme of overseas sales, one that again is possible only because of the BBC's constitutional embeddedness. *Sherlock's* popularity in China is an example: an East Asian market for British (London, really) Victoriana has been established for a while, drawing on the rise of an ideology of neutrality in the Victorian empire, and moreover a literary canon that both claimed global civilizing powers and relied on projections of neutrality. To this is added the paraphernalia of rational gentlemanliness in

Holmes read through his conduit Benedict Cumberbatch. Within such a layering of neutrality, exceptional quality is seen to float to the top quite naturally, and consequently claims to meritocracy (and therefore quality) are offered perpetual recirculation.

The founding role of the state broadcaster

To listen to some of the BBC's descriptions of itself, such as those provoked by the May White Paper, we might think that the institution arose as a result of spontaneous popular demonstrations throughout the UK. It didn't. It was created right at the heart of the state by *laissez-faire* empire loyalists. It was meant to be the primary vehicle for neutral claims to British exceptionalism, and such claims have not changed. Indeed, they are increasingly necessary in Britain's efforts to sell itself to the world. The BBC was created largely as a result of recognising that the core need for neutrality – previously undertaken by civil service testing, literary education, the ideal of gentlemanliness, and so on – would have to take a more 'mass cultural' form throughout the commonwealth. Hence, behind its neutrality, there are always specific state demands for public morale. Somewhat as with the General Post Office's public communications role, the BBC was created as an archetype of the modern public corporation, and ever since its 1927 Royal Charter commissions have regularly concluded that, as the 1951 Beveridge Report (on Broadcasting) put it, the Corporation 'carries with it such great propaganda power that it cannot be trusted to any person or bodies other than a public corporation'.

This is John Reith's 'unity of control', and the knowledge that, as the Crawford Report argued in 1925, 'only the state could license the BBC to be "a public corporation acting as a trustee for the national interest"'. However, James Curran and Jean Seaton date the rise of the BBC's performance of neutrality, or the point at which 'the BBC invented modern British propaganda', as emerging during the 1926 General Strike²⁵, a time when, as Tom Mills reminds us [in his chapter](#), the state role of the neutral BBC became explicit. And although the BBC did occasionally censor in the 1930s, it increasingly relied on an ever more overt performance of transparency, which would gradually be codified as political balance, a competition within accepted limits taken as neutral and enshrined in the BBC guidelines as 'a wide range of significant views and perspectives'.

However, the great emotional claim of neutrality comes after the massive consolidation of cultural agencies in the wartime emergency of 1939-42 (the Ministry of Information, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts, the British Council, the Board of Education), when neutrality found its great role in the instrumental demand of public morale.

The BBC was able to propel mass domestic audiences into an exceptionalist neutrality at a time when, as Sian Nichols puts it, 'empire was again a persistent theme in British domestic as well as overseas broadcasting'.²⁶ Between the 1920s and '40s, that is, the BBC increasingly understood its role as aligning Britain's global economic role with domestic public opinion, and it was for this role William Beveridge recommended the continuation of its monopoly. The World Service, established as the Empire Service in 1932, and funded by government grant-in-aid, would come to have a pivotal role in globalising neutrality. And this bind between the BBC and British foreign policy continues. Reacting to a 2011 scare over cuts to the World Service, in his Institute of Commonwealth Studies lecture Philip Murray described how '[i]f you're going to have a serious foreign policy you should concentrate on what you're good at, and in Britain's case that's the BBC'.²⁷

Citizenship as brand loyalty

The grip on public opinion, and the grip on global markets which always goes with it, is typically what is imagined to be at risk from 'private sector' contamination. This, of course, is why no British government really wants to risk the BBC brand. However 'privatising' the government seems it must appreciate the mobilising power of this brand. Even the notoriously 'privatising' Thatcher government made this clear in their *The Future of the BBC* document, released in 1992. And, even when other claims for the protection of the BBC are offered – say, from within what is usually called 'the public' but is better understood as the BBC's state-determined 'public without people' – the fetishisation of neutrality as an educational tool for the masses is upheld, raising serious doubts about the probity of such positions and reinforcing the dangerously unquestioned assumptions about Britain's imperially-derived ability to create and disseminate what it calls (in its own interest) neutrality.

The controversy created by the May 2016 White Paper makes clear that the need for 'distinctiveness' can still be guaranteed to generate emotional defences of the BBC's British branding credentials. Moreover, the BBC's centrality to the constitution enshrines its ongoing virtual monopoly on the visual and legal signs of the public, and pushes other providers to echo its formats and draw from its cultural capital (as with *Downton Abbey* most obviously, often taken as a BBC production but in fact an ITV one). The story of the dangers of privatisation averted at the last moment segues seamlessly into the need for a homely and apparently popular defence of the BBC to maintain its marketability overseas – the need, that is, for *nation-branding*, described by Melissa Aronczyk as an overseas message that must also be performed at home: people "live the brand"... perform[ing] attitudes and

behaviours that are compatible with the brand strategy... “immersing” themselves in the brand identity’.²⁸

The BBC’s mobilisation of neutrality and ‘the public’ is perhaps the most powerful example of nation-branding ever seen. It is one that can be readily fitted into the long ‘culturing’ of neutrality, and tells us much about how naturally the branding of neutrality comes to Britain. In fact, as Aronczyk shows, virtually all the active nation-branding consultants to be found anywhere in the world are based in London. The BBC’s vision is both patriotic and instrumental, that is, it is rigorously politically neutral because it aims to be above political debate entirely. In Aronczyk’s terms, it is ‘rooted in the unifying spirit of benign commercial “interests” rather than in the potential divisions of political “passions”’.²⁹ It is also a prestige continuum for which the gritty ‘realities’ of financial London are also familiar and domestic – as in the opening titles of the UK *Apprentice* series and so many BBC dramas – reminding us that what is most homely is also what is closest to the economic core. With such an entanglement of citizenship and brand loyalty, the outraged defences of the not-a-state state broadcaster can be assumed to continue.

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They are co-authors of *The Public on the Public: The British Public as Trust, Reflexivity and Political Foreclosure*.

2: Getting back in touch

The loudest accusations around BBC elitism usually centre on the insufficient visibility of women and ethnic minorities: ‘Pale, male, stale’, in other words. Sir Lenny Henry and others are doing invaluable work pushing for BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) groups to achieve genuinely equal access to all levels of the Corporation. Yet much more must be done, in this field and others. Britain has emerged after the result of the EU referendum as a country more keenly aware of deep divisions in society. There is an urgent need for an intersectional approach at the BBC as a key cultural institution tasked with representing and reflecting the varied demographics of these islands.

This section touches on representation, participation and power through the lenses of race, gender and class as well as national and regional issues. In her chapter, Rhian E. Jones points to the BBC’s neglect of socio-economic background as part of a diversity framework, and lays out the dire consequences. Speaking from her experience as a young film-maker working with the BBC, Sarah O’Connor writes of how class, gender and race all work to close doors, and proposes how they might be opened.

For Charlotte Gerada it’s plain peculiar that the BBC doesn’t have a woman’s editor. While the Corporation’s gender quotas are positive, as is their new commitment to 50/50 on-air roles by 2020, this doesn’t ensure issues of gender justice get sufficient space. This isn’t only about who gets a voice, but what they are permitted to say. Chimene Suleyman makes a plea against the “fetishisation of struggle” that minority groups are forced to negotiate, while railway workers and union activist Daniel Randall proposes bringing back industrial relations reporting.

Accusations of London elitism against the BBC have deep roots in the disconnect between the Corporation’s history and structures and the ever-shifting balance of power between the nations and regions of the Union. Following the 2014 Scottish independence referendum the BBC came under heavy criticism. Iain MacWhirter proposes a new Scottish digital channel as the only sure way to heal and move on. It’s a proposal that merits revisiting now Scottish independence is again under discussion following the referendum result.

Finally, Dan Hind sets out the case for a new commissioning model. He argues that only

radical civic equality will permit audiences to overcome powerful interests and build an account of the world based on the best available evidence.

Make a school iPlayer

Mark Cousins



The BBC formed me. I grew up in a working class household in which there were no books or pointers to the world of art and ideas. As a boy, I fell in love with films, painting, music and buildings and BBC TV programmes like *Vision On* and *Arena* and their film seasons on Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles were exciting lifelines. A great art teacher at school helped, and the *NME* introduced me to new bands, but it was the BBC, more than anything else that stimulated my brain.

I have some criticisms of it now: It feels too part of the establishment, its coverage of the Scottish independence debate was misjudged, and its weather map tilts away at the top, which makes Scotland – where I live – look smaller than the West Country. But more production in Bristol, Salford, Glasgow and Belfast has helped de-centralise it.

My one idea for the BBC is to make a Schools iPlayer. The iPlayer is a treasure trove – a museum, a circus, a library. I like, in particular, when old programmes from the 60s, 70s or 80s appear on it. I know that there's a BBC Schools website, but there should be a whole new iPlayer which dovetails completely with the British education system. It would take lots of time and money to go through the entire BBC archive, and curate it with the curriculum in mind, but doing so would make a world class learning panopticon. Themed teaching packs on history, society, science and the arts, using decades of TV and radio programming, would contribute a huge amount to the lives of young people in the UK. Building the BBC into the school system in this way would be a real contribution to society, and, of course, a bulwark against those who attack, or seek to downsize, it. Shame on them.

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The Corporation needs to care about class

Rhian E. Jones

Given the BBC's national reach, and the fact that most of us pay the licence fee, the corporation has a duty to reflect its audience. A variety of training schemes and targets have been implemented over the years to improve representation in terms of gender, ethnicity and ability among BBC employees and within programming – most recently the corporation's 'ambitious new diversity and inclusion strategy'³⁰ for 2020. As part of this, the BBC's Head of Diversity, Inclusion and Succession underlined the challenge of representation, stating:

The BBC belongs to everyone in the UK, whatever their background, so everyone at the BBC has a responsibility to ensure that we represent, and are representative of, the public we serve.

Attempts to improve diversity in a workforce like the BBC's, however, rarely focus on how socio-economic background can influence success. If the BBC is truly committed to representing the British public, it should recognise class as a fundamental dimension of disadvantage which intersects with several others.

The BBC's strategy for 2020 promises to "focus on social inclusion by gathering socio-economic information from all new employees". The educational background of BBC staff began to be systematically recorded in 2007. However, when confronted with FOI requests³¹ for this information, the corporation responded that to compile the data in a usable format would require too much time and money. The BBC is geared to employ staff from a range of backgrounds, which should in theory have lessened the formerly nepotistic reliance of 'Auntie Beeb' on a recruitment pool of the privately educated. But until information on class is publicly available, it remains difficult to tell what impact such initiatives have had on the BBC's socio-economic makeup. A small but useful part of the picture was provided in a 2014 report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission,³² which found that a third of BBC executives had attended Oxford or Cambridge, compared to one per cent of the public as a whole. Similarly damning is the fact that 88 per cent of the public went to a comprehensive, but just 37 per cent of BBC executives did, while 26 per cent attended independent schools and a quarter went to grammar schools.

Of course, it's not just the BBC. Research by the NUJ in 2011 found that across journalism

as a whole,³³ fewer than ten per cent of those entering the profession come from a working-class background, and just three per cent from homes headed by semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Although working for the BBC in one of its regions can offer a more secure route to a national position, the internships and informal research contracts often offered as a first job are largely London-based as well as low-paid and insecure. So aspiring journalists without existing family or industry connections, and those who are financially unable to survive the early unpaid or freelance stages of a media career, find themselves at a disadvantage.

These material difficulties help to explain why leading figures in journalism are so heavily drawn from private schools and Oxbridge, but there are also cultural factors at play. As Simon Albury has noted³⁴ in respect of the BBC's Cultural Diversity Network Action Plan, positive initiatives over the past fifteen years, though commendable, have not been enough to implement lasting and visible change. The BBC's Head of Religion and Ethics, Aaqil Ahmed, having worked his way to senior level with no industry or family connections, found it harder to progress once there:

There is a lack of diversity of socio-economic classes the higher up the food chain you get but I think the correct educational background from certain educational establishments can open up opportunities for advancement. [Although today the BBC] would be easier to enter as there are so many entry level and diversity schemes, [my] concern is what happens when you are in, I think without the right educational credentials to fit in your career would stall at a certain level.

Ahmed's experience echoes recent criticism of the BBC's race representation strategy for focusing on filling quotas rather than more deeply altering a still relatively 'monocultural' corporation. A narrow range of backgrounds at the top not only produces a narrow range of experiences but also tends to perpetuate itself, as those already in positions of influence recruit in their own image, thereby entrenching the over-representation of an elite in executive roles. In 2014, a training event for senior BBC staff acknowledged this 'unconscious bias' in terms of gender and ethnicity, but made no mention of how it might extend to matters of class. Former BBC executive Pat Younge, in an article exploring the BBC's problems with audience retention, makes the point³⁵ that BAME audiences in London tend to be "disproportionately young and disproportionately poor", and that "coming up with a real plan addressing the BAME issue may also help the BBC address the class and age issues". The same intertwined issues are present in terms of recruitment, where improving class representation should also help improve the representation of other disadvantaged

groups.

A recent study of British journalism³⁶ which, refreshingly, attempted to measure socio-economic diversity (via education level) alongside gender, race and religion, made clear the sometimes contradictory ways in which these categories interact. The “academisation” of journalism – almost all journalists with three years of experience have a university degree, while over a third have a Masters – seems to be having positive effects on gender representation, as women continue to outnumber men on university degree courses. But it can have less desirable consequences for socio-economic diversity, as those from disadvantaged backgrounds are three and a half times less likely to enter university. The increasing financial cost of university education in the UK is likely to exacerbate this divide for future generations of British journalists.

This situation both reflects and reinforces a wider crisis of class representation across contemporary politics, media, culture and the arts. While the BBC has reported on the manifestation of ‘elitist Britain’ within other institutions, it could also consider how its own structural disparities are reflected in its creative output. The BBC is the country’s most significant commissioner of new content, and a restricted array of class backgrounds among its commissioning and producing layers means that its programming often fails to recognise, understand or represent the wide variety of class experience in Britain. Aside from retro confections like the recently revived *Upstairs Downstairs*, the BBC’s portrayal of the working class is largely confined to sensationalised splashes like *Britain on the Fiddle*, despite criticism of this kind of reality TV as unrealistic and unrepresentative ‘poverty porn’. Within reporting, Sarah O’Connell [describes in this book](#) how few BBC news journalists “see enough of life at the ‘bottom’ of society to report on it properly or accurately” and explores the negative impact this has on stories relating to working-class lives and experiences.

Addressing the current state of affairs will involve cultural and material change both within and beyond the BBC. When questioned, a BBC spokesperson reiterated that: “We believe it’s important that we represent a range of backgrounds and perspectives both on screen and off air”. The BBC’s welcome effort to improve its representation in terms of gender, race, sexuality and ability has gained it a place in the top ten public sector organisations for inclusion and diversity. Giving similar attention to class representation would involve accounting for the influence of socio-economic factors on an individual’s chances of employment and career progression, and actively recruiting and supporting applicants from working-class backgrounds. Practical work is required to address the obstacles of low pay,

precarity and insecurity at the early stages of a media or arts career, and the dominance of unpaid internships and the informal 'old boys' network' as a way into BBC employment.

Will the BBC's diversity targets for 2020 help to overcome its class-related blind spot? Its plan to partner with jobcentres to ensure that "25 per cent of all our work experience applicants will be sourced from the job-seeking pool" may be helpful in lessening the nepotism, and hence socio-economic restriction, which has previously characterised the BBC's employment practices. But one hopes that the corporation will concentrate on providing long-term paid jobs, not just the kind of unpaid and insecure work experience that usually requires applicants to have family wealth or a base in London. Targeted internships and diversity schemes will also do little if they only provide entry to a culture which remains inhospitable or impenetrable at executive or commissioning level. On this issue, the BBC's commitment to recruitment and selection practices that focus on merit rather than background, including the extension of anonymised application for core roles, is welcome if long overdue.

Recent research suggests that Britain's creative sector is increasingly becoming 'the preserve of the rich'.³⁷ Today, the BBC exacerbates the problem. It could instead become part of the solution.

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Allow young minority groups to tell a narrative that is not confined to cliché

Chimene Suleyman



There is a certain type of likeness that is given to, or expected of, people of colour. In fact, it stretches across all young marginalised communities. We are told we may only see ourselves represented in the media in *Kidulthood*, *Top Boy*, *East Is East*, or *Bend It Like Beckham*. These are tiresome and repeated tales about how race or socio-

economics holds us back, limits our dreams, pushes us towards violence and poverty. Commissions for spoken word pieces, scratches, and documentaries are offered with the understanding that we may speak within the confines of immigration, terrorism, welfare and street crime. Young people have disengaged simply because the fetishisation of struggle has become so upsettingly limiting for their creativity or viewing. We need to give young writers, performers, poets, and journalists the opportunity to tell a narrative that is not confined to what we assume they should typify. We must allow an environment that encourages narratives about love and food and boredom; beautiful work written and produced by people from these backgrounds who have so much more to say about this world.

Chimene Suleyman (@chimenesuleyman) is a writer from London. She has spoken on race politics for the *Independent*, *International Business Times*, *The Debrief*, *The Pool*, Media Diversified, and *Newsnight*, to name a few. Her poetry collection, *Outside Looking On*, was included in a *Guardian's* Best Book of 2014 list. She is featured in *The Good Immigrant*, a collection of essays by British BAME writers. Chimene currently lives in New York.

The BBC has lost touch: here's how it could re-connect

Sarah O'Connell

In 2012 I produced a film for BBC *Newsnight*, which was an investigation into Bed and Breakfast accommodation and the housing of young families for well over the legal limit of six weeks in cramped and dingy rooms. The film was difficult to make. It involved spending weeks creeping in and out of bed and breakfast properties in South London, pretending I wasn't really a journalist, but was instead visiting friends who lived there. I received bed bug bites from sitting on infested beds for too long, saw raw sewage seeping back into bathrooms from faulty systems and listened to mothers talk to me, whilst they sobbed and washed sheets in tiny sinks or fed their children from cramped kitchenettes. Nobody wants to talk to a journalist when this kind of thing is happening to them. Who would? And out of the fifteen or so families I spoke to for the film, only two would agree to come on camera. So it took time to find the contacts, and get the access. And most of that time I spent in really grotty conditions with people who were extremely distressed by their circumstances.

On the night the film was transmitted, I watched from the gallery, as is the norm, and as the film was ending, one of the programme's staff producers came over and asked me 'where did you come across this story?' so I told him that I'd been visiting a young girl who was living in the hotel, and had seen her living conditions first hand. So I had begun to ask questions. His response was 'that's so unusual - to go into a story from the bottom up', and that statement sent a small chill up my back. Because in so many ways this epitomises the problem with BBC journalism. It's become 'unusual' for them to go into a story from the 'bottom up'. I replied to my colleague saying 'well what other way is there to get a story? I don't think the Department for Communities and Local Government are going to send me a press release telling me about it?' I didn't mean to rebuke him. But really, how else are we to find out these things, unless we go in at the 'bottom'?

The truth is, not many national BBC news journalists see enough of life at the 'bottom' of society to report on it properly or accurately. If most of my colleagues at the BBC didn't start life with a silver spoon in their mouths, by the time they've served ten years at the BBC (and the longevity and security of a BBC news staff job is recognised industry wide), they've pretty much gained honorary status of the establishment class. And it's quite a comfortable class to be a part of. But quite possibly, in fact almost definitely, it's not the best place to find and recruit your journalists.

Another, perhaps more telling example of this kind of 'top down' approach, took place for me in 2000 when I joined the BBC in its Millbank political newsroom as a planning researcher. My previous job had been as a political researcher in the House of Commons, and I had watched with interest, and no small amount of horror, at the way Parliament operated in general, and more specifically, at the way that MPs expenses were claimed and processed. Within three months of my arrival at the BBC's political newsroom I had pitched a story on MP's expenses to the news desk. I pointed out that I knew of MPs who were essentially refurbishing their homes by using the 'Additional Home Allowance' and also that all shades of MPs were entertaining their friends and families at posh Westminster restaurants, eating lunches that cost over £150 sometimes, and then billing the taxpayer, via their expenses. I was told, 'this isn't a story, MPs have to eat'. But it was a story. It was one of the biggest political stories of the decade. And the BBC missed it, because, to most of their journalists at that time, the idea of having lunch for £150 on expenses, well, it just wasn't a story, was it? Not when it was exactly the kind of thing BBC news executives might be doing as well.

But when you walk into a BBC newsroom you can see and hear the privilege. There are only a few genuinely working class voices. There are hardly any black faces at all. Earlier this year, I produced a film for BBC News with a young woman, Lucy Martindale, who I had known for some time. Lucy is black. She grew up around gangs and had PTSD as result of all the trauma she had witnessed and this was the subject of our film. And as we walked into BBC news for the first time, I warned her 'people will probably really look at you in the newsroom, but ignore it'. They did look. And she did ignore it. But when we came out again, she said to me 'But Sarah, where are all the black journalists? We're in London. There's loads of black people here'. And it's a good question. Where are all the black people in BBC news? Well, I can answer that. Mostly they are opening the doors for all the white people, and cleaning out their bins. Give or take a few notable exceptions.

I'm not stupid though. I know that there are loads of BBC journalists that care a great deal about fair representation in their work place and serving the public interest in their output. Some of them are my friends and I have huge respect and liking for them, both personally and professionally. But it's not good enough. The BBC has over two thousand journalists. And a significant chunk of them rarely leave the office – or if they do, it is to rush out, make a film, run back to the edit suite and cut it for broadcast. Most of the 'people finding' is done over a phone.

I realise that this is not unusual in any of the nation's national newsrooms, broadcast and otherwise. I've worked for other news organisations and seen little difference in their

approach. But the BBC has a special purpose – its *raison d'être* is to serve the public interest, not to chase news agendas. But as local newspapers have diminished in number and output, BBC *national* news has neglected to step up to fill this vacuum. And it could do. It has the resources. And the staff. And it has a duty to do so.

And, of course, news demands this kind of journalism – this kind of hurried film-making and story telling. But news also demands context and understanding, explanations and examples. And these can only come with time and effort put in – if you are telling the stories of the poorer members of society – or the dispossessed. Those people that can't access lawyers, don't attend community meetings and centres regularly, and rarely come into touch with any 'professional' people, unless they are social services or the police. And there are an awful lot of people out there like this (let's face it, class wise, BBC journalists sit at the top of the pyramid). And there is a lot of really bad, and unreported, stuff happening to them. But in order for journalists to locate them and get them to speak to us, we must take our time. Show them they can trust us. Listen – really listen – to their stories. And, of course, with time, the stories become more involved. We learn a lot more. People speak more freely and tell us things that only a week before they would never have said to us. And then we can get to the truth.

There are so many things the BBC could do, really quite easily, to rectify all this. They have financial resources and the unquestionable resources of a highly educated, willing, dedicated work force. But it's not about money. It's about the attitude at the top. About the senior executives really caring about this issue. So if I was running BBC news, then what would I do?

Take the time

Well, for starters I would require all BBC journalists to go out into local 'grassroots' communities for extended periods of time - weeks, not hours - and not to make films or file stories, but to listen and talk to people. I would tell them 'go and make friends with people in local law centres and community groups and sit there for a week watching who comes in and out and listen to their stories'. Yes, it's uncomfortable. It's not like doing an interview with an MP in a nice cosy office. You will be out of your familiar zone - people will speak badly to you - some might even try to intimidate you. Even the lawyers and professionals will distrust you – most people that work at 'grassroots' do distrust us. (I have lost count of the times I have been told 'sorry, we don't deal with journalists, they lie about us'.) But we should persevere. Keep trying and keep showing that our interest in their lives is genuine. Prove we're not voyeurs. Show them what a journalist really does – and how much we can matter.

The reverse side of this coin is to invite people into the BBC. Last year I worked training journalists in community radio in South Sudan. Every station was open to the public, and local people would come in and speak directly to a reporter or producer. This worked brilliantly because it was easy and you didn't need to 'know' anyone before you popped in. The BBC should think about this. Why not have 'drop in shop' days? Where journalists are available to speak first hand and in person to people who have an issue or a story. We should be accessible. Not living in ivory towers. And we should be the ones who are making ourselves accessible. We should be reaching out – not the other way around.

An investigations unit

And, quite obviously to me, and [as Meirion Jones has argued](#)³⁸ – the BBC needs an investigations unit. How is it even possible that it doesn't already exist? Take the IPCC for example: a hugely powerful organisation, charged with holding the police accountable. But there has been no really thorough investigation done of them. Instead, the BBC does little packages and pieces, and a Panorama some time ago. But to really, truly investigate what goes on at the IPCC, well, it could take a couple of years and ten journalists. But the BBC has these resources. Nobody else does. But they do. Why not use them? Why not have a long-term strategy to look at organisations like the police, the IPCC, the coroners, housing, legal aid, asylum, immigration? It will take a long time to get people to speak out because they will likely be vulnerable and distressed. But it will be worth it in the end.

Who gets to be staff?

There are so many other things to do, too many to list here, but finally, the BBC must change its recruitment process. It must start employing working class kids, black and white, and training them up as journalists. The days of kids from the estates coming up through the local newspapers are long gone. Now, the route in is Oxford (or some other swanky university) and then to ask your mum's friend who works there if there is any chance of a job. Over a third of BBC executives are ex-Oxford or Cambridge. And so working class voices – black and white – are not flourishing in the BBC. They are almost silent. And the stories that the corporation covers reflect the make-up, attitudes and demographics of its staff. This needs to stop, before this demographic is lost to the BBC forever, not just in staff, but in viewers. And if the BBC cannot find a way to recruit the non-privileged through its traditional channels, then it must look at other options. As Rhian Jones has pointed out,³⁹ whether effective enough or not, there are plenty of schemes and quotas for black and ethnic minority groups, while the issue of class is not being addressed. The BBC must consider positive discrimination taking class into account, if its news output is to truly reflect ordinary

people's concerns and issues.

The BBC still holds the potential to improve the face of UK journalism, because where they lead, others still follow. They still have the time and the resources to do this. And they must ensure they do. Even when taking all the cuts into account, BBC news is a vast operation, with more journalists and bureaus than any other news org. But the upcoming Charter review should take into account the fact that the BBC is losing touch with its public, and there should be remedies included – real solutions, not lip service – to change this. Because they might not realise it now, but it's what will make BBC news, and the BBC overall, able to survive and flourish – to truly represent the public interest – and to gain back so much of the respect that it has lost in recent years.

Sarah O'Connell is a broadcast journalist and film-maker and has worked as a freelancer for many of the UK's major news organisation over the past sixteen years. She began her career in journalism working as a researcher for BBC political news. Since then she has worked for most of the BBC's major news outlets, including Radio 4, *Panorama*, *Newsnight* and the Victoria Derbyshire programme.

BBC News needs a Women's editor

Charlotte Gerada



It seems odd that in a world struggling to address issues of gender injustice that a global giant like BBC News doesn't have a women's editor. If one was recruited she could ensure that events and issues relating to women, both at home and abroad, could be explained and understood through the critically important lens of gender.

The reasons for creating such a role are clear: despite much progress over the course of the last century, gender inequality – socially, politically and economically – persists. Its effects are indisputable with women experiencing disproportionate levels of violence, abuse, poverty and lack of opportunity. During the recent review of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, world leaders isolated gender inequality, along with climate change and human rights, as an issue urgently in need of attention and resources; at the European level MEPs recently called for a clearer strategy, with defined targets, to address gender discrimination in work, education and public life.

One in three women across the world experience violence; women spend at least twice as much time as men on domestic work, and when all work – paid and unpaid – is considered, women work far longer hours than men. And yet two-thirds of those in poverty across the world are women.

Such conditions are compounded by women's civil and political disempowerment. Women aren't afforded enough meaningful opportunities to find solutions to the problems they experience and change the status quo themselves. Women make up just 22% of parliamentary representatives globally, with less than 8% of countries having had female heads of states over the last 50 years.

While the UK is not among the worst perpetrators in regard to such matters, women's issues remain massively overlooked in our national conversation. Our parliament is dominated by men, with only 22% of MPs being women. There are more men called John leading

FTSE100 companies than there are women. In England, there is a gender pay gap of 10%. The converse of this at times elite discussion of gender inequality is how austerity, as has been well-documented, disproportionately impacts women. Poverty and inequality in the UK – just like the rest of the world – has a female face.

Some might wonder what the impact of a women's editor might be, given the scale and depth of the issues briefly mentioned herein. Others might question why the BBC should concern itself with such matters at all.

Firstly, much of the UK print media has women's editors, and the BBC creating a similar role would mean it remains, at the very least, up to date with much of the rest of industry. Secondly, by providing insight and a deeper level of analysis through a gendered lens, the BBC would help raise questions and catalyse debate, generating conversations and solutions to one of the great challenges of our age. Finally, the BBC is an institution which is – for many – a totem of quality and professionalism. Were it to make institutional changes to accommodate a broader and more nuanced debate relating to gender, many citizens, practitioners, influencers and politicians would take notice. They might even follow suit by creating similar roles in their own organisations.

Britain needs to put issues of gender front and centre of public debate: on care, on families, on work, on domestic abuse, on pay, on income inequality, on austerity and on housing. What I've proposed here would be a small step but a crucial one. Just as the BBC has editors for economics, business, foreign affairs and health, so too it should have one for women. In doing so it would allow its audience a richer understanding of issues which often seem unrelated but which intersect through a prism neglected within the mainstream media.

Charlotte Gerada has worked for more than six years on campaigns, policy and communications in the UK charity sector. Propelled by a commitment to fight for social justice, Charlotte has contributed to projects by the Irish Women Survivors Support Network, Friends of the Joiners Arms and UnDivided that sought to challenge gentrification, gender inequality and social divisions.

We need a new Scottish channel

Iain MacWhirter

There's never been much love lost between the BBC and Scottish National Party members. Nevertheless, the BBC fringe meeting at this year's SNP conference in Aberdeen was a torrid affair by any standards. The SNP had just won a landslide in the 2015 general election and delegates weren't going to let the BBC bosses forget it.

Irate nationalists accused the corporation of perpetrating "lies and half truths", and even – shock horror - distorting Scotland's size on the BBC weather map. The BBC's commissioning editor for Scotland, Ewan Angus, accepted that the BBC had "issues" with news and cultural coverage in Scotland, and that "they would be addressed". But that only seemed to intensify the anger and disgusted delegates ended up walking out of their own fringe meeting.

Now, I should make clear that the leadership of the Scottish National Party does not endorse these criticisms of the corporation. Indeed, Nicola Sturgeon told the Edinburgh Television Festival this year that she did not accept that the BBC had displayed "institutional bias" during the referendum campaign. Though mistakes were made.

Indeed, they were. In the dying days of the campaign, after a YouGov opinion poll had suggested the Yes campaign were in the lead, a legion of BBC and other network correspondents piled over the border as if to a foreign country on the verge of civil war. Many were poorly briefed – often by the UK Treasury – and there were significant errors of tone and judgement, as even the BBC's former political editor Nick Robinson has conceded.⁴⁰

But not even⁴¹ the leader of the Yes Scotland campaign, Blair Jenkins, has accused BBC of being politically biased. Neither he nor the Scottish Government authorised or led the two noisy demonstrations staged by independence supporters outside the BBC's headquarters in Glasgow's Pacific Quay during the 2014 referendum campaign. Nevertheless, Jenkins is the first to argue that the BBC needs to change to reflect the changing constitutional make up of the United Kingdom.

It certainly does. I spend a lot of time speaking to conferences and book festivals across Scotland and I am invariably surprised by the degree of hostility to the BBC from the very people who should be its greatest supporters. These are people who would normally defend

public service broadcasting to the death. A large proportion of them, by no means all nationalists, say they no longer trust what they hear on the BBC.

Research by the BBC Trust confirms⁴² that more than half of Scottish viewers believe the BBC does not accurately reflect their lives in news and current affairs output. This is not a sustainable situation for a public service broadcaster. There is a gulf of trust that must be bridged before the various internet-based campaigns aimed at boycott⁴³ of the licence fee get off the ground. Indeed, many on social media claim already to be refusing to pay the fee, now it has effectively been decriminalised.

Yet the solution to this credibility problem is readily to hand. Back in 2008, the Scottish Broadcasting Commission called for a dedicated digital television channel to be set up in Scotland to address the organisational and cultural centralism of the BBC. It calculated⁴⁴ the cost at a modest £75m, a tiny sliver of the BBC's annual revenues of over £5bn. The idea won very widespread support. Indeed, the proposal received the only unanimous vote – Labour, Tory, SNP and Liberal – ever recorded by the Scottish parliament.

However, the idea was barely discussed at UK level where responsibility for broadcasting remains a reserved power of Westminster. The UK Department of Media Culture and Sport ignored it and officials I spoke to seemed to regard it as a purely SNP ploy to create a propaganda channel at public expense. But this dedicated channel was very different from the SNP's vision of a Scottish Broadcasting Corporation, which it set out in the Scottish government's independence white paper in 2013.

Indeed, a Scottish digital channel has very little to do with nationalism. A channel that attempted to promote a party line would fall foul of statute and would be so boring that viewers would switch off in droves. Anyway, there already is a dedicated Scottish television channel, which has been in operation since 2008, which has never been accused of promoting independence - the only problem is that it is in Gaelic.

BBC Alba was a joint venture by the BBC and the Gaelic Media Service, a government-financed body that promotes the Gaelic language and culture. It transmits to 35,000 or so who claim to speak the language. The notion that there could not also be a channel for the other five million Scots who happen to speak English is a bizarre form of inverted cultural discrimination.

Why was Gaelic seen as a special case? Well, some believe this goes back to the dawn of devolution when there was a view in certain unionist circles that the Gaelic community might

be more sympathetic to the UK than the lowlanders. But mainly it is because supporters of the Gaelic language were well organised and presented a case that was listened to on its own merits. The Scottish digital channel labours under the image of “Alex Salmond TV” - the idea that the former First Minister would decide the running order of the bulletins.

This is infantile. David Cameron doesn't dictate news values on the UK BBC. Scotland may have voted to remain within the Union, but it is now a largely self-governing nation within an increasingly federal UK. Yet the BBC remains a monolithic British institution, dedicated to reflecting a unitary United Kingdom that no longer exists.

This was why the former BBC Director General, John Birt, conspired with Tony Blair to oppose the creation of a Scottish Six O'Clock news bulletin back in 1999 when the Scottish parliament was created. In his 2002 autobiography, 'The Harder Path', Birt talks openly about this collaboration to fight “separatism”. It was a classic exercise of misguided centralism.

It was self-evident to anyone who had been following the constitutional debate that the creation of a parliament in Edinburgh with primary law-making powers across the range of domestic policy – education, health, justice, environment etc. – was going to require a devolved news service. But instead, bemused Scottish viewers have been fed stories on hospital trusts, free schools etc. that are irrelevant to their lives.

The BBC is thought to be now belatedly considering the creation of just such a devolved network bulletin. But I'm afraid things have moved on over the past sixteen years. The “one BBC” approach is no longer tenable. The corporation needs to build bridges if it is to restore public trust.

A Scottish public service channel would not end the criticism of the BBC overnight - indeed, it might even intensify it initially. But the point is that this grievance would be repatriated. Instead of the BBC being regarded as a London-based and essentially imperial propaganda service, here would be a service dedicated to covering Scotland in its own right.

This would not be an exercise in nationalist propaganda or cultural self-flattery, but an opportunity for Scotland to explore the many problems faced by a country in transition, as it struggles to find a place for itself somewhere between the European Union and the United Kingdom.

In a further twist, the Guardian recently reported that the idea of a Scottish digital channel

had been seriously considered⁴⁵ as part of the BBC's charter review process. Indeed, the paper reported that the idea had only been dropped because of government funding cuts.

If that is the case, then it should be picked up again - fast. This is one of those ideas – like devolution itself – which is fiercely resisted and even reviled right up until the day it is actually instituted. After which everyone wonders what the fuss was all about.

Bring back industrial relations reporting

Daniel Randall



“It is that time again – when bickering between Tube bosses and union kingpins bring the London Underground to a juddering halt, and the streets of the city resemble a termite mound that has been poked with a big stick.”

So began a BBC online article which promised readers the “facts to know” about strikes on the London Underground.⁴⁶

There was barely a pretence of impartiality, and almost no effort to explain what the grievances behind the strikes actually were.

Other articles about the dispute described it as a “row”, suggesting a kind of pointless tiff between two opposing parties that should just be gotten over. Where unions were quoted directly, it was in one or two sentences cribbed from press releases.

Our strikes are held in particular contempt by most of the media. But BBC coverage of Tube strikes is consistent with its wider reporting of industrial relations. Here, strikers’ voices are rarely heard, and the workers’ case is communicated only through truncated interviews on the evening news or clipped. Coverage of the junior doctors’ dispute was somewhat more in depth, perhaps because the BBC calculates that doctors are held in higher social esteem than railway workers, but even this struggle was routinely referred to as a “row”.⁴⁷

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect even a democratically invigorated, more progressive BBC to take workers’ side in its coverage of industrial relations. That is why the labour movement needs its own media; ultimately, our aspiration should be to create a contemporary equivalent of the media production of Chartism, the mass workers’ movement of the 19th century.

But what we can demand of the BBC in the here-and-now, beyond a basic degree of journalistic rigour that attempts to at least report the reasons why a strike is taking place at all, is coverage that understands industrial disputes as expressions of genuine conflict between employees and employers— that is, something more serious than “bickering” or a

“row” — and which does not treat workers either as sheep or puppets manipulated by “union kingpins”, or as walk-on cameos in stories that are really about our employers.

How to achieve this? A start might be to reinstate the now almost extinct role of labour and industrial correspondents: print and broadcast journalists whose responsibility – in a bygone age – was to exclusively cover industrial relations. That function has now almost entirely been absorbed by “business editors”, which inevitably gives primacy to the actions, interests, and perspectives of the employer.

The extinction of industrial and labour correspondents over the last three decades was largely justified by the decline in the level of industrial conflict, combined with the dramatic shrinkage of the labour movement itself (currently around 50% of the size it was at its height in 1979). But those trends are not irreversible, and besides, BBC industrial correspondents could do more than simply report on strikes. Trade unions remain the largest mass movement in Britain. If our national public service broadcaster is to remain in any meaningful sense “popular”, it must treat workers, and our movement, as conscious actors.

Daniel Randall (@therubykid) is a London Underground worker and a rep for the RMT union, a Labour Party member, and a supporter of the socialist group Workers' Liberty.

From Public Service to Public Control

Dan Hind

The recent vote for Brexit has highlighted concerns about the ability of our media system, taken as a whole, to distinguish between fact and fantasy. A highly partisan and privately owned print sector sets the agenda for a public broadcaster whose commitment to balance leaves it helpless when confronted with unashamed myth-making.

In truth, the problem long pre-dates the EU Referendum. To take only one, highly consequential example, the media were almost entirely unable to describe what was happening in the economy in the years before the financial crisis of 2007-8. The government of the day and the great bulk of academic and journalistic opinion were happy to leave the financial sector to pursue profits wherever they were to be found. The media on which most people rely had nothing to say about the reckless expansion of credit and compounded their failings by accepting the Coalition government's hallucinatory analysis of what had gone wrong.

When untrue claims are backed by powerful interests, the media cannot be relied on to treat them with scepticism, let alone hostility. As a result, the management of the economy and the conduct of foreign policy are explained to the citizens of a democracy in language that mixes baffling technical jargon, baby talk and outright fabrication.

The suppression of inconvenient facts and the subversion of reasonable debate by power will only be remedied by the application of a counter-power. The public, who rely on the media for information about events beyond their immediate experience, must take part in decisions about what the media investigate, and how the results of these investigations are treated. At the moment the public are kept innocent of the commissioning process and reliant on the pre-prepared offerings of media that are integrated with broader networks of elite power. As long as this remains the case we will be exquisitely vulnerable to manipulation. Public opinion, which is notionally sovereign in a democracy, is subject to private, and effectively secret, control.

In order to establish the public character of public opinion, it is vital for each citizen to enjoy some measure of direct power to shape the investigative agenda of professional journalists and to secure exposure for the results in the circuits of widely available speech. This power

needs to be both material and institutional. That is, we need to be able to direct funds towards investigations and influence the way that media institutions with access to large audiences treat the results of those investigations.

In this way the public will be able to develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of matters that powerful interests are currently able to keep obscure. Imagine the difference such a system could have made in the run up to the financial crisis. Instead of having to make do with the bland assurances of BBC journalists about financial market deregulation, we could have understood in good time what was happening and taken steps to minimise the damage. Instead of having to accept George Osborne's fairy tale about what had gone wrong we could have debated our options after 2007 in at least partial possession of the relevant facts.

We could of course develop a system of publicly accountable media production outside the confines of the BBC. But at present in the UK much of the money that is intended to promote journalism in the public interest is collected through the television licence and passed on to the BBC – some £3.5 billion annually. The BBC is therefore an obvious place from which to operate the accountable and transparent funding system that I propose. And by reforming the BBC in this way considerable cost savings could be made. At the moment a great deal of the BBC overhead is spent defending the institution from political attacks and trying to understand its audiences needs through market research. By opening up editorial decision-making to the public the BBC serves, the institution will be able to dispense with this vast effort of discrimination and rationalisation. *Imagine what the talent and ingenuity of senior executives thus liberated from work in a stifling bureaucracy will be able to achieve in the private sector!*

Once the principle is conceded – that money from the public intended to subsidise journalism should be distributed in line with the stated preferences of that same public – any number of approaches are possible. One possibility is a system in which a substantial sum of money, say £175 million annually, or around 5% of the licence fee, is given to journalists, publications and research consortia on the basis of a vote held two or three times a year.

Funding would be organized at the level of the devolved nations and the English regions. In this way the artificial distinction between national and local news can be challenged. Everywhere is part of the world and the current focus on Westminster as the centre of public significance by broadcast news does much to debilitate and distract the rest of the country. As we are belatedly realising, economic development takes place at the regional and sub-

regional level and the odds of success will be shortened if the relevant publics have the information they need to develop an accurate understanding of their fellow citizens and to challenge corrupt practices in the public and private sector, and in the growing zone between them.

BBC departments would publish proposals for funding from third parties and work with local government to ensure that they are available through the library system. These departments would only exercise minimal oversight to ensure that proposals qualified as journalistic or public interest research projects. Individuals, existing or start-up publications, NGOs and others would all be able to make applications for funding. And they would have to make the results of their work publicly available. Another voting round would mean that citizens can then give an indication of the weight that should be afforded to particular bits of research in the broader public media system. This combination of polls to determine funding priorities and to evaluate outcomes allows editors and journalists to understand the audiences they exist to serve.

More importantly, it allows us all to develop a better picture of what our fellow citizens think. Politicians and communications professionals won't be able to broker controversies however they see fit. We will find out for ourselves what really unites and divides us. As Stella Duffy notes in [her piece for this ebook](#), we are perhaps competent to judge for ourselves what we would like to learn, and what knowledge we would like to share.

The idea that we prise some of the licence fee away from the immediate control of BBC executives usually prompts panicky warnings about top-slicing. In truth, the licence fee is already top-sliced. At the moment politicians of all parties insist that coverage focuses tightly on them and their antics in Westminster and the BBC for the most part obeys. The BBC does not make decisions about the news agenda in splendid isolation from other elements of the state and from the private interests that carry most weight in the official mind. It is culpably naïve to argue as though they do. The fact that the contestable fund proposed in the BBC White Paper specifically excludes news and current affairs makes it plain that, behind all the theatrics about bias, the government values and appreciates the work the BBC does to reconcile us to the established order.

There is a hard problem with opening up the editorial process to a co-producing public: extremists will seek to use it to peddle poisonous untruths. But while most people are fond of their prejudices they prefer not to be deceived. To the extent that claims are false they will be subject to effectual challenge in the same system that gives them publicity. Universally

applicable standards and regulations would apply to all content generated.

Compare this with the situation that currently prevails. At the moment the owners of the private media are able to peddle pernicious fantasies that are lucrative or that they find in some way gratifying. These fantasies are not subject to robust challenge in forms that their audiences will also access in large numbers. The BBC's television news does not lead with criticisms of the lies that emerge daily from the print media. Indeed, as a number of contributors to this book have noted, BBC journalists are more likely to take these print media as a proxy for public opinion.

Besides, it is easy to pronounce on what is and isn't a fit subject for inquiry. But it is exactly those areas that are most hedged around by elite inhibitions and evasions that are most consequential. Most editors and publishers are sure that people who talk about the Federal Reserve are nutcases, political conspiracies are rare and inconsequential, and that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. In much the same way, Jimmy Savile was once a much-loved national treasure, offshore finance was boring, and Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Only the steady application of uninhibited curiosity and investigative talent in a publicly accountable system of public speech can break the conventional complacency that rules in much of our media.

We face a growing challenge from illiberal and fantastical politics. If we really want to meet this challenge we must take seriously the extent to which political reaction is enabled by a dysfunctional communications order. The apparatus of elite authority and administrative expertise in the UK and the US has lost enormous prestige since the financial crisis. The remedy is not for those who wield power to try harder. We must begin by acknowledging that public distrust of the mainstream media is rational and legitimate. And then we must work to make the systems of media production and distribution less lethal to accurate descriptions.

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3: Regaining trust

The BBC is still perceived as the most trustworthy news provider in the UK and is one of the nation's most respected institutions. Yet 'Auntie Beeb' now exists in a world in which its founding values of objectivity and its claim to the 'non-political' centre-ground are under renewed scrutiny.

Julian Petley situates the BBC in the emerging context of a 'post-truth politics', drawing out lessons that urgently need learning in the aftermath of the referendum campaign. There is a resounding sense that the BBC's approach to 'balance' impeded its duties to 'educate' and 'inform' and other chapters in the section imply that this failure emerges from the ways in which the BBC organizes debates.

Thus Oliver Huitson takes stock of what has occurred since his 2012 report on the BBC's failure to adequately cover the passing of the 2012 Health and Social Care Bill. The state of the NHS today, he says, confirms his and others' findings around the repetition of government spin, while Harry Blain's chapter on the BBC and security traces a line from the internal censoring of 'media subversives' in the 1950s to today's coverage of mass surveillance. While these criticisms can be seen as matters of 'left versus right' they also touch on issues of what Tom Mills calls 'establishment bias', which he traces back in its current form to Thatcher's reorganization of economic and social life in the 1980s..

How might this loss of trust be addressed? Peter Hitchens advocates the greater use of a *Today*-style adversarial system, while Brian Eno proposes an innovative retrospective programme to be named "What Actually Happened". Meirion Jones sets out a detailed plan for an investigations unit to shake up the internal culture of the BBC. The Jimmy Saville scandal, which Jones helped uncover, was made possible by this internal culture and the institution will not be able to make good on its commitment to truth-telling absent major structural reform. Meanwhile George Monbiot wants to ensure that coverage of rural life includes serious investigative journalism as a counterweight to the "bucolic nonsense" of *Countryfile*.

Yet as the authors on belonging explore, we must acknowledge that it is, to a greater or lesser extent, in reference to an imagined public that we make these calls for the BBC to regain trust and reconnect. Ian McEwan reminds us of this, and echoes some of Julian Petley's concerns, in his plea for the BBC not to give in to the 'moron's call'.

Auntie Beeb and government surveillance

Harry Blain

In 1952, Conservative MP Waldron Smithers sent Prime Minister Winston Churchill a list of potentially “subversive” BBC employees.⁴⁸ Among them was Anatol Goldberg, head of the BBC Russian service: a “Jew... who controls the selection of programmes and is a communist.” Encouraging Churchill to create a “committee presided over by an English judge or QC... who could make an extensive enquiry into communist activities”, the MP added: “we have traitors in our midst... and although I should deplore suppression of free speech they should be treated as traitors.” Churchill passed Smithers’ concerns on to MI5, whose staff concluded: “In the considered view of the Security Service, communist influence in the BBC is very slight and does not constitute a serious security danger.”

If he were alive today, Waldron Smithers would have been relieved to see the footage of the BBC’s Nick Robinson grabbing an anti-war sign from a protestor and stamping on it after it “gatecrashed” his broadcast.⁴⁹ Such images – along with the narrow ethnic, class and political make-up of the BBC⁵⁰ – make it hard to believe that the Corporation could ever have been a breeding ground for revolutionaries. Yet such fears, over several decades, cemented a close relationship between the BBC and state security agencies. This history – little-known and rarely repeated – is central to understanding the Corporation’s role in public life today.

“He digs with the wrong foot”

In August 1985, David Leigh and Paul Lashmar of the *Observer* published “concrete evidence for the first time of the way the security service, MI5, secretly controls the hiring and firing of BBC staff.”⁵¹ Based on interviews with former BBC staff and senior executives, Leigh and Lashmar described how for “internal BBC staff applying for promotion” MI5 “keeps continuous political surveillance on those it considers ‘media subversives’ – a category which can include directors, film editors, even actors”, while “the names of outside applicants are submitted to F Branch ‘domestic’ subversion desks at MI5” and “fed into a computer containing the details of 500,000 ‘subversives’.”

Those whose appointments were scuppered included the *Guardian*’s Richard Gott⁵² (“an ultra-leftist” who “digs with the wrong foot”) and a Welsh film editor blacklisted for his membership of the Welsh Communist Party as a young man. In some cases, it appeared that individuals were blacklisted due to erroneous or out-of-date intelligence.

The BBC described the *Observer*'s report as "greatly overdramatised",⁵³ while the former Tory Home Secretary William Whitelaw [argued](#)⁵⁴: "There is nothing wrong in the BBC as an employer taking proper precautions to ensure that sensitive posts or information are not open to subversion. Indeed, it would be failing in its duty to the public if it did not do so."

The evidence, however, suggests that vetting went further than "sensitive" positions. In 2006, the *Telegraph* obtained previously confidential documents under a Freedom of Information Act request, which showed that at one stage MI5 "was responsible for vetting 6,300 different BBC posts – almost a third of the total workforce."⁵⁵ The documents also revealed that the security services were actually "concerned about the number of people being referred to them by the BBC. During the first four months of 1983", alone, "they were asked to investigate 619 different individuals."

Stuart Hood,⁵⁶ a "maverick" former BBC TV Executive, took a harsh view of these practices:

*"If the BBC was honest about its role, it would admit that it must support the central political authority by virtue of the State licence-fee system. But the Corporation has always had this fantasy about itself as a totally independent social organisation."*⁵⁷

Covering surveillance today

Does this history matter, when such Cold War practices, as far as we know, ended in the 1980s?

In one sense it does, as Seamus Milne wrote in February 2015,⁵⁸ because it demonstrates how the BBC "was always an establishment institution, deeply embedded in the security state." In another, it raises the question of the extent to which such an "establishment institution", even today, is capable of aggressively reporting on the abuses of the British security state and government surveillance more broadly.

Here, the Corporation has not been immune to criticism, particularly in light of Edward Snowden's revelations of massive GCHQ and National Security Agency (NSA) spying in June 2013. In 2014, openDemocracy founder Anthony Barnett [suggested](#) that if the BBC's duty "is to inform, educate and entertain, it has fallen down on all three counts with respect to surveillance."⁵⁹ The *Intercept*'s Glenn Greenwald, meanwhile, put it more strongly [in March 2015](#), arguing that "[o]f all the countless media outlets around the world covering NSA reporting over the last 18 months, the BBC has easily been the worst: the most overtly biased in favour of mass surveillance and official claims."⁶⁰

If not “overtly biased”, the BBC has often shown its willingness to uncritically follow “official claims.” In June 2015, the *Sunday Times* ran a story⁶¹ claiming that “British spies” were “betrayed to Russians and Chinese” as a result of Snowden’s leaks. The story was not only based almost entirely on anonymous government sources, but also provided no concrete evidence to support its claims: indeed the only piece of evidence it provided – that Greenwald’s partner, David Miranda, “was seized at Heathrow in 2013 in possession of 58,000 ‘highly classified’ intelligence documents after visiting Snowden in Moscow” – was completely false and quietly removed from the article⁶² (Miranda did not meet Snowden at all).

The BBC, nonetheless, led with the story (conveniently published soon after a highly critical 373 page report by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation), prompting a confused guest to state live on BBC News (see 4:30): “It’s extraordinary that the BBC would lead with this story when there’s simply no evidence that it’s actually true at all.”⁶³ This fits with a much wider trend of the BBC following the agenda set by the press,⁶⁴ often magnifying the influence of newspapers even while their readership declines.

“Does @BBC not fact check?”

Other examples are less obvious. The debate over the government’s Investigatory Powers Bill (labelled the “Snooper’s Charter” by its critics) brought William Binney, a former highly-placed NSA official for over thirty years, to testify before Parliament in January 2016. Binney, who quit the NSA in 2001, **told MPs** that “bulk [data] acquisition is a major impediment to success by analysts and law enforcement”; and that not only were elements of the IP Bill “totalitarian”, but also part of a wider “collect it all” approach that “costs lives, and has cost lives in Britain because it inundates analysts with too much data.”⁶⁵

While Binney’s testimony was covered prominently by the *Guardian*, RT and the *Independent*,⁶⁶ the BBC’s website gave it five lines at the end of an article in its “Tech” section, titled: “Dutch government says no to ‘encryption backdoors’.”⁶⁷

As the IP Bill was being prepared for the House of Commons in March, Edward Snowden himself observed a problem with the BBC’s headline: “Surveillance law: Revised bill adds privacy safeguards.”⁶⁸ As he pointed out on Twitter, the government had in fact changed just one header in the bill, from “General Protections” to “General Privacy Protections.” “The revised bill actually *removes* some privacy protections from the last version, and is more intrusive”, **he added**. “Does @BBC not fact check?”⁶⁹

Of course, the BBC does fact check, but as has been demonstrated in detailed content analyses of BBC News coverage, political sources are “much more likely than other sources to be featured in the opening sections of news reports”, meaning that stories are “framed from party political perspectives.”⁷⁰ Thus, you will always hear the Home Secretary’s defence of the Bill and her opposite number’s (usually small) concerns – and maybe a more critical perspective from the Tory MP, David Davis⁷¹ – but not the perspective of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy, nor that of 200 lawyers saying the IP Bill “compromises the essence of the fundamental right to privacy and may be illegal.”⁷²

What the public deserves

Nonetheless, with its broader national security coverage, the BBC has frequently angered politicians by producing critical programming and reporting. From Margaret Thatcher’s suggestion during the Falklands War that the BBC’s reporting was “assisting the enemy”,⁷³ to the Blair government’s accusations of BBC bias following the Today programme’s report on “sexed-up” Iraq War intelligence,⁷⁴ the Corporation has always had to cope with significant political pressure. Although the evidence suggests that on, for instance, Iraq, the BBC if anything displayed a pro-war “bias”,⁷⁵ these “sensitive” national security issues are among the most difficult for a public broadcaster to cover critically.

When covering surveillance, the BBC can also point to examples in its defence – on *Newsnight*, *Panorama* and elsewhere.⁷⁶ But ultimately, it has shown a tendency to take its cue from the dominant press or government narrative; to shift surveillance stories into a “tech” rather than privacy debate (its website literally does this); and to rely on party political sources – frequently bipartisan defenders of the security state⁷⁷ – in framing its reporting.

No matter what positions we take on government surveillance, from Snowden’s leaks alone we have seen the most powerful and well-funded intelligence agencies repeatedly misleading not just their citizens, but even UK cabinet ministers and the entire US Senate.⁷⁸ In these circumstances, critical, adversarial journalism is the least that the public deserves, and as our public service broadcaster the BBC has a responsibility to provide it.

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Support rural investigative journalism

George Monbiot



Let's have a series whose purpose is to inoculate viewers against *Countryfile*'s bucolic nonsense. Instead of presenting rural life as timeless, unsullied, innocent, removed from the corruption and complexities of urban living, it would show us what is really going on.

The issues that are currently swept under the sheep's fleece carpet would be dragged into public view. It might cover the speculative property boom that has seen the price of farmland rise 12-fold in four years, as much of it is snapped up by City money or by opaque funds in offshore tax havens.

It might explore the rural housing crisis, exacerbated by the capture of much of the best stock by second home-owners and the rack-renting of farm cottages by absentee landlords.

It might discuss farm subsidies, which currently represent perhaps the most regressive transfer of tax receipts of the modern age, as taxpayers of all stations pour their money into the pockets of landowners, who are paid by the hectare (the more land you own, the more public money you are given). Among these people are the world's richest benefit tourists: oil sheikhs, oligarchs and financiers who scarcely set foot in this country.

It would take cameras into intensive pig and chicken farms, abattoirs and meat processing factories. It would show how the soil is being stripped from the land by contract farming, how the BBC's beloved sheep farmers help to cause floods downstream by ensuring that no trees grow on the hills, how wildlife is wiped out by subsidised grouse shoots.

It would be bold and investigative, exposing what powerful interests do not want us to see. The exact opposite, in other words, of the BBC's current rural coverage.

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The General Strike to Corbyn: 90 years of establishment bias

Tom Mills

This piece was originally published to mark the 90th anniversary of the 1926 General Strike, on 9th May, 2016.

In step with the rest of the British media, the BBC has in recent weeks afforded considerable coverage to allegations of pervasive antisemitism in the Labour Party. In itself the attention given to this issue is not objectionable. The crisis is real enough, in the sense that a cynical political campaign against the left of the Labour Party has proved fairly effective; that much at least is 'news'. The problem is that if examined in detail the evidence underpinning the slow burning political crisis, which itself has been systematically misrepresented, is not only insubstantial, but is plainly being advanced by right-wing interests inside and outside the Labour Party.

One would perhaps not expect a press that has either participated in this witch hunt, or is politically aligned with those who have, to interrogate the claims being so widely disseminated by Corbyn's enemies. But that is why we have the BBC. In theory a public service broadcaster should be able to stand above sectional interests and cut through the disinformation. It is after all constitutionally committed to educating and informing its audience. I am not in a position to judge the BBC's coverage of this rather sorry episode as a whole, but the performance of its flagship TV current affairs programme *Newsnight*⁷⁹, for example, which in itself raises serious questions about its output, particularly in light of its inaccurate reporting⁸⁰ on Corbyn and his supporters even before he was elected leader.

Moreover, the perception of BBC bias against the left has been compounded by the lack of coverage the BBC has afforded the racist campaign of the Conservative London mayoral candidate Zac Goldsmith, which has been supported by the Prime Minister. The lack of reporting on allegations of electoral fraud by the Conservative Party at the last General Election – a topic which has received considerable attention online and has been covered extensively on Channel 4 – is even more troubling. What explains the apparent double standard?

Corbyn himself quietly acknowledges⁸¹ the hostility of the BBC to the party membership which elected him, mentioning the *Today* programme, along with *The Sun*, as a notable obstacle to the development of popular left-wing movements. The Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, agrees. He has remarked that⁸²: 'It can sound like we're paranoid but the reality is that the treatment Jeremy has had across the media has been appalling. It's the worst any politician has been treated.' On the BBC, in particular, he attributes the hostile coverage to the influence of the press on broadcasting. 'They are taking their stories from newspapers rather than investigating and reporting for themselves and therefore the bias of the press infects the broadcast media too.'

The cut and thrust of political life naturally throws up accusations of media bias, especially when politicians and political parties are 'on the ropes', and in the UK the BBC, by virtue of its reach and prestige, has always bore the brunt of such claims. BBC journalists understandably grow weary of the allegations, and often protest that they are attacked from left and right. The problem with this argument is obvious: being attacked equally from both sides doesn't mean that each side is equally right. The great sociologist Max Weber remarked that we should 'oppose to the utmost the widespread view that scientific "objectivity" is achieved by weighing the various evaluations against one another and making a "statesman-like" compromise among them.' 'Scientifically, he wrote, 'the "middle course" is not truer even by a hair's breadth, than the most extreme party ideals of the right or left.'⁸³

As it happens, McDonnell's impression of the BBC's coverage, unlike the often hysterical claims from the right, has the virtue of being supported by the scientific evidence⁸⁴. Research by Cardiff and Loughborough universities into the political reporting during the last General Election campaign, for example, suggested not only that the press were overwhelmingly hostile to the Labour Party, even before Corbyn's leadership, but that the BBC's coverage very subtly favoured the interests of the Conservative Party. The tone of the BBC's reporting was balanced, and the coverage afforded the two major parties was broadly equal, but the attention the BBC gave to particular political issues, especially in the final crucial weeks of the campaign, played to the strengths of the Conservatives. Thus the NHS and housing, despite being central concerns for the public, disappeared from the BBC's coverage with the focus being on the issues on which the Conservatives were strongest. Justin Lewis, Professor of Communication at Cardiff University, quite reasonably concludes⁸⁵, like McDonnell, that this pattern of reporting can be attributed to the agenda setting function of the press.

Assuming this is true, though, it would seem to raise a further question: why does the BBC

allow the press to set the agenda in this way? McDonnell's claim notwithstanding, the BBC certainly has the resources for independent investigation, reporting and fact checking. What it lacks is not resources, but the constitutional capacities to live up to its promise of political independence, and here we need to look more deeply into its organisational DNA, perhaps even back to its very beginnings.

This week marks the 90th anniversary of the UK's first and only General Strike, which was not only a key moment in British political history, but also the history of British broadcasting. The BBC, then still a private business consortium, was soon to be reconstituted as a public corporation, and with the private press shut down it was, along with the newssheets published by the Conservative Government and the Trades Union Congress, the only available source of news. The General Strike therefore represented an early test of the young broadcaster's capacity for independent reporting, and it was a test it failed dismally.

Most famously, the BBC's founding father, John Reith, refused to broadcast a message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who unlike his Roman Catholic counterpart – the Archbishop of Westminster, whose statement was broadcast – chose not to condemn the strike as a sin against God, adopting instead a somewhat more conciliatory tone. Even more significant than such questionable editorial judgments though, is the fact that BBC news was routinely shaped in accordance with a partial political agenda. This in part reflected the precarious position in which the BBC found itself. It was left officially independent on the understanding that it would continue to broadly serve the political objectives of the Government and the interests it represented. As the historian A.J.P. Taylor wryly remarked, Reith had

*managed to preserve the technical independence of the B.B.C... by suppressing news which the government did not want published. This set a pattern for the future: the vaunted independence of the B.B.C, was secure so long as it was not exercised.*⁸⁶

During the strike, the BBC was, moreover, not only 'biased' in its reporting, it was more fully integrated into the machinery of the British state. Reflecting on the strike some years later, Reith recalls that he and a number of other BBC staff moved into the Admiralty, with the Government's head of PR, J.C.C. Davidson. To understand the significance of this, it should be remembered that the Royal Navy was central to Britain's status as a global superpower, and the Admiralty was thus a comparable institution to the Pentagon in the post-war period. From there, the BBC's then Chief Engineer Peter Eckersley recalled, BBC news was 'not so much... altered as given bias by elimination.'⁸⁷

The BBC's lamentable record during the General Strike has been widely acknowledged in academic and journalistic accounts. But it is usually seen as an episode which whilst marred by unfortunate compromises, was in the end something of a bumpy start on the road to full independence. But the General Strike can on the contrary be seen as having set the terms for the BBC's incorporation into the Establishment, and arguably the British state itself. In their definitive social history of interwar broadcasting, Scannell and Cardiff argue that with its reconstitution into a public corporation shortly after the strike, the BBC 'crossed the political threshold', becoming 'a "governing institution" with aims and functions delegated to it by Parliament, committed to cooperation with government, and sharing its assumptions about what constituted the "national interest".' By the 1930s, they write, the

continuous routine contact [that] had built up over the years between senior personnel in Broadcasting House, Whitehall and Westminster meant that they all abided by the same rules and code of conduct. The Corporation had become the shadow of a state bureaucracy; closed, self-protective and secretive.⁸⁸

The private press was another key element within this nexus of institutions; bound up with the corporate and political elite, and since the earliest years of broadcasting maintaining both an antagonistic and symbiotic relationship with the BBC. In terms of BBC reporting, this state of affairs has resulted in broadly pro-Government positions, and a much deeper affinity with officialdom and the institutions of the state.

The BBC's treatment of Corbyn and his supporters; its apparent reluctance to criticise a plainly hostile Conservative Government; and its related deference to the press in its political coverage needs to be understood in this context. And the latter aspect is not merely a reflection of the power of Murdoch and his ilk. Newspaper and broader media coverage are part and parcel of the political games played out at Westminster and an important part of the broader communicative strategies of the British elite. The press is therefore seen by the BBC as a perfectly legitimate source of political opinion, even in the wake of the corruption and criminality revealed by Leveson. It reflects the BBC's essentially Establishment orientation, which as I describe in my book⁸⁹, was entrenched under Thatcher and then New Labour, and is now thoroughly embedded within its organisational structures and editorial culture.

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Make programmes no one else will

Brian Eno



There are two programmes I'd like to have on the BBC – and they're not programmes anyone else is ever likely to make.

The first would be a show called *What Actually Happened*, which contrasts the media reaction at the time of

events taking place with what we subsequently have come to know about them. I suggest this because I want a counterbalance to the echo-chamber effect of the Internet, where a mere rumour can become 'fact' in seconds ('Edward Heath was a paedophile!!!'), and there is never any systematic re-examination of who said what after the 'story' has faded. A show like this could help us all become a bit less gullible, a bit less sure that 'where there's smoke there's fire'. Sometimes there's just smoke.

The second is also a sort of public affairs show, called something like *Them and Us*. It would take universal issues – immigration, old age, education, trade unions, prisons, the courts, social security, abortion, divorce, work and so on – and look at how different societies deal with them. How does the German court system work? How do people feel about divorce in Russia or China? How do Swedes deal with immigrants? Why is Finnish education so successful? What's blue collar work like in South Korea? Do Vietnamese have pension plans?

We in Britain are incredibly lucky to have a service that *can* present material of this kind. There's a good reason that it should continue to do so - because if the BBC abandons its special role as the site for the relatively trustworthy, inclusive national conversation it now is in favour of insular, ratings-driven populism it has already lost the battle. In a ratings war, the BBC doesn't stand a chance, for it can never be as wholeheartedly vacuous as the commercial channels can be (though it's currently trying quite hard to get there).

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How the BBC betrayed the NHS

Oliver Huitson

In his [chapter for this book](#), Meirion Jones writes: "Take the junior doctors' strike this month. *Newsnight*, to its credit, ran a MORI poll showing 66% public in favour, 18% against. But on the day of the action *Today* trawled for anti-strike patients, and the BBC *News at Ten* ran two negative voices from ordinary people, and no-one in favour."

For anyone disappointed by the Beeb's coverage of the ongoing junior doctors fiasco, it's worth remembering they have serious form here.

The BBC's woeful reporting of the Coalition's Health and Social Care Act in 2012 looked bad when I wrote the report, *How the BBC betrayed the NHS* in September 2012.⁹⁰ It now looks much, much worse. Because what has now unfolded puts to rest any lingering doubts as to the nature of the changes the Tories have inflicted on Britain's most loved institution. This was a coup. And the BBC connived, however unwittingly, in its execution.

As the bill moved through parliament, the BBC repeatedly trotted out highly dubious government spin as fact, culminating tragically with its headline on the day it became law: 'Bill which gives power to GPs passes'. How have GPs reacted to this empowerment? Just two years after the bill passing, polling of GPs by the BMA found 74% of GPs reporting unmanageable or unsustainable workloads. Less than one in ten said they felt their morale was 'high' and not a single GP said it was 'very high'.⁹¹

On the detail of the GP commissioning, my report cited the following as one of the scores of stories the BBC ignored:

at least half and sometimes all of the GPs that dominate [commissioning] boards have a personal financial interest in a private or other non-NHS provider. (False Economy, reported in the Guardian)⁹²

This car crash in waiting duly came to fruition. By November 2015, £2.4bn of taxpayers' money had already been handed out to providers owned by the very GPs responsible for commissioning care.⁹³ But this is just a small part of the story. The actual business of commissioning, as I and others warned at the time,⁹⁴ was destined to be run long-term by major firms, because doctors are not accountants - they're doctors:

Yes, most of the NHS budget was handed to GPs. But they are now handing it over to private firms. It's phase two of the privatisation project ... As the Observer reveals this morning,⁹⁵ the list of approved suppliers ... is dominated by management consultancies, outsourcing giant, Capita, and US health insurer, UnitedHealth, the previous employer of NHS CEO, Simon Stevens.⁹⁶

Again, as I and others suggested⁹⁷ Lansley has indeed gone on to take up lucrative roles in the private health sector. In November we learned that he had taken on another three paid roles, including with a drugs company and a private equity firm with substantial health interests.⁹⁸

Many of us warned that Lansley's bill represented the destruction of the NHS as a nationalised service and the beginning of its life as a fully fledged market.

All the facts pointed to this. But beyond the *Guardian* and Channel 4, mainstream opposition in the media was limited, with some honourable exceptions. Opposition instead mainly came from small independent sites like openDemocracy, Social Investigations and False Economy, campaigners like 38 Degrees and NHS Support Federation, and academics like Allyson Pollock, Colin Leys, Lucy Reynolds, and many more. The end result was a clear divide between social and traditional media; they were worlds apart. Social media was seething with anger while the BBC calmly invited four pro-bill voices to discuss the issue on the radio.

The BBC was not the only offender, that's true, but it was one of the worst. Even the *Mail*, and arguably the *Telegraph*, were more critical of the bill than the BBC. I examined the coverage of the press in general for Tallis and Davis' 2013 book, NHS SOS.⁹⁹ But regardless, the Beeb is a unique institution and should be held to standards befitting of that status - and that funding.

Now, we have unfortunately been proved correct. In April 2015, data for the past year showed a 500% increase in the value of NHS contracts won by the private sector. Since 2010, the report continued, the private sector has won 60% of contracts. Of the thirteen 'super contracts' over £100m handed out that year: "the private sector companies won six, five were won by consortia containing both non-NHS and NHS organisations, but only two were won by NHS organisations working alone" (Paul Evans, NHS Support Federation).¹⁰⁰

So what sort of firms are now providing 'NHS' care? Well, a full half of them have links to the Conservative party.¹⁰¹ Indeed, by February 2014 Tory donors [had already won](#) £1.5bn of

NHS contracts.¹⁰² It's almost as if there might be selfish motives for health industry figures to donate to the Tory party, yet no one at the BBC thought it was a story during the passage of the bill: its online news gave just 21 words to the subject. In total.¹⁰³ No clip of it being covered by either BBC radio or TV has yet emerged.

Many, like Branson's Virgin Care, seem to be making very efficient use of tax havens¹⁰⁴ - something you'd think the government might try to clamp down on, given that it is public taxation funding these contracts. This crucial part of the equation is something the Treasury continues to dodge when assessing sell-offs: when privatising any state asset it should be taken for granted that its new owners will pay little or no tax, shrinking the tax base further. In the case of PFI the Treasury assumed these firms would pay a ludicrous 25% of profits back in corporation tax. Many were moved offshore,¹⁰⁵ with one HSBC wheeze paying just 0.3% tax.

Nor are contracts limited to health companies. The public has now been treated to the prospect of £1bn worth of NHS services being provided by Lockheed Martin, the well known US arms dealer.¹⁰⁶ This is what a health market looks like, and it's a little different from the 'local family doctors' narrative that the government pushed and the BBC parroted.

In one of the most sordid moves to date, the Conservatives flogged the nation's blood plasma supplier to Mitt Romney's private equity firm.¹⁰⁷ This is important, because our plasma supplies were effectively nationalised precisely because the market is a poor deliverer: maximising profits means paying donors the minimum possible, which in practice tends to mean setting up shop in run down areas of deprivation with high rates of disease and drug addiction. What is now abundantly clear is that for the Conservatives it is profit rather than your health that is the driving force behind our healthcare system.

The BBC seemed to swallow the government's spin that if an NHS service was provided by, say, Serco, that was not 'privatisation'. The World Health Organisation disagreed, it defines health privatisation as "A process in which non-governmental actors become increasingly involved in the financing *and/or provision* of healthcare services" [my emphasis]. It would be nice to think the BBC would side with the WTO (and health campaigners across the country) over the likes of Andrew Lansley and his spin team, but alas. What's becoming clear now, however, is that it is also the *financing* of healthcare that is destined to be privatised: the Conservative government, just months after being elected last year, began its formal inquiry into charges and insurance-based care.¹⁰⁸

"I don't know how much any of you realise that with the Lansley act we pretty much gave

away control of the NHS” (Jane Ellison, public health minister).¹⁰⁹

Ellison makes no mention of GPs, the people we were told they were handing that control to. That’s probably because they are of increasing irrelevance to the Conservatives: only 1 in 5 GP practices think they will still be around in 10 years time.¹¹⁰ 85% think they will have been fully privatised by then. If you recall, this was the health bill which in the words of the BBC “gives power to GPs”. It gives power to multinational health corporations, accountants, lawyers and Tory donors, that is the reality.

My 2012 report caused a modest stir. The BBC issued an initial response that was both weak and unsuited to the proportions of the charges made. Encouraged by openDemocracy chair David Elstein, they came back with a fuller response shortly after - not a single point of substance was refuted:

For example, Oliver Huitson states that the BBC did not report a British Medical Association denunciation of the changes on 1st March 2012 but ignores the fact that we have reported the concerns of the BMA, alongside those of the Royal College of Nursing and Unison, on a regular basis for the past 18 months. He also suggests that the BBC ignored evidence of privatisation but doesn't take into account a significant amount of coverage on this, including articles about Circle and Hinchingsbrooke, the extent of private sector involvement under patient choice and the extension of that into community services. (Director of news Helen Boaden)

In other words, 'yes, we ignored all the specific stories and revelations in question but we did include other things in these broad areas'. It was an 8,000 word report. That’s quite a lot to miss. The phrase "private sector involvement" was typical of the BBC's lack of clarity. In practice it means "large chunks of the NHS are being given to private firms".

Nevertheless, I said I was happy to look at TV and radio and the BBC duly gave me some links to what they felt was their hardest hitting material. Disappointing doesn’t begin to describe it. Not a single specific omission from the report was covered in these clips, so the argument that the problems were only in the online material looks increasingly weak. But more importantly some of the material the BBC sent to me was so questionable that I was puzzled they had even volunteered it for consideration. To take just one example (and bear in mind, tragically, this is from a collection the BBC *hand picked* as a rebuttal to the 2012 report), they sent a clip from the *Today* programme, in which a Royal College of Nursing (RCN) representative is interviewed:

RCN: [the bill is being put into practice before being signed off by parliament, the bill is a distraction.]

BBC: *"...would it be more of a distraction stopping now? It's going to cause more chaos... if you stop the reorganisation you're not going to shorten waiting lists are you... it's a management distraction, not a doctors distraction... I don't really see how you save waiting times in casualty by Andrew Lansley changing their minds about what they spend their time on."*

RCN: [Disagrees. Mentions the cap on private treatment is being raised to 49%]

BBC: *"Ah, doesn't this get to the heart of it, in any industry the people who work in the industry don't like competition, and basically these reforms are about competition..."*

RCN: *"You have a situation recently where an NHS hospital in London has sued the strategic health authority in London for a million pounds and we understand there's an appeal against that."*

The legal action the RCN cite was not something reported by the BBC despite their being informed of it in one of their own interviews, and it was reported elsewhere. Interesting too that the bill has gone from being primarily about "giving power to GPs" to being "basically... about competition". No clip has yet been found of the BBC pressing Andrew Lansley on what the "heart" of his bill was *really* about. The toughest questions seem reserved for nurse's representatives, who are accused of causing "chaos" and simply being scared of competition.

I had started to write a full follow up analysing all the clips the Beeb sent; I gave up in the end because there was so little to say. It merely confirmed what I and many who had read the report suspected: there was no great difference between BBC's TV and radio coverage and BBC Online's output when it came to reporting on the health reforms. Why would there be? BBC News and Online are run from the same newsroom. Of course, the inclusion of radio and TV guests gives more room to a wider breadth of opinion and argument, but the big stories were still left uncovered.

Even if the broadcast material had been heavy hitting and fearless (just entertain this fiction for a moment), that still leaves BBC Online guilty of a profound failure on a critical public issue. BBC Online is the [third most viewed news source](#) of UK sites.¹¹¹ And it's publicly funded. That scenario alone should have resulted in a formal inquiry by the BBC.

A senior BBC presenter did tell me, some months later, that the 2012 report had been circulated and read 'right to the top'. But what was really needed was a full and open inquiry into how well the BBC's coverage of the bill reflected the realities of the legislation being passed. I would hope that now, with the benefit of hindsight, even the BBC would concede that serious errors were made. But it's not clear that all that much has changed.

The following was cited in a blog from November 2014,¹¹² talking about how the BBC ended a segment on the speech of 92 year old Harry Leslie Smith, and his fears for the NHS under Conservative control. They didn't 'balance' Smith's opinion with government opinion, they balanced it with government spin dressed as fact.

"Both [the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats] are committed to the founding values of the NHS that no one, regardless of income, should be deprived of the best care". (BBC)

Now, this is untrue, the H&SC Act quite explicitly ends the notion that all care is open to anyone, for free. This is spin, and it flies in the face of observable reality. It should be reported as government claims, not a factual account. The statement "... no one, regardless of income, should be deprived of the best care" is word for word identical to a speech by Jeremy Hunt the year before.

The problem is compounded in the same piece by claiming the Coalition had "increased NHS spending". They had initially pledged to increase real terms NHS spending, a pledge they broke. As the BBC understands perfectly well, real terms spending is the only figure that matters, and it is real terms spending that the government claimed would increase.

In July last year I found on my TV screen the most bizarre program about 'extreme couponing'. Set in the US, one lady in a supermarket bought 260 toilet rolls, 125 sports drinks, and various other absurdities. The 5 trolleys of goods came to \$700, reduced to \$96 because she had a small mountain of coupons. Now, the dietary shortcomings of this sports drink diet are by the by, the point is the reason she was doing it: *to pay her medical bills*. That's where we're headed. And the tragedy is that all this was predicted, with great accuracy, by so many people – but not the BBC. It looked like a stitch up, it walked like a stitch up, it stank like a stitch up - and, lo and behold, that's exactly what it was.

What is desired from the BBC on this issue is the same now as it has always been: to challenge and investigate power rather than to amplify it. They failed on the Lansley bill, and that failure makes it harder for them to maintain the levels of public support needed for their own survival. It was a strategic misjudgement. There is only one major nationalised entity left

for the Tories to sell: the BBC.

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Ban politicians who evade questions from the news

Lewis Parker



Jeremy Paxman famously asked Michael Howard the same question twelve times without receiving an answer. Even after this watershed moment of contempt for public discourse, the thing about the news that still drives everybody mad, no matter their political views, is when politicians refuse to answer to a question – and the fact that they keep getting away with it.

Of course, politicians insult us by expecting us to accept that a relevant answer to the question, “How many libraries have closed under this government?” is: “this government supports literacy.” Or that repeating an irrelevant answer four times increases its pertinence.

In a democracy, where policy makers are supposed to be scrutinised by the media rather than given free air time, swerving questions is clearly unacceptable. Interviewers do their best to bore through contemptuous evasion, but they also have an understandable reluctance to infuriate audiences by repeating the same question over and over again.

As it stands, politicians and spin doctors know that having an electorate so repulsed by political discourse that they abstain from it does them no harm. So if the news is to be anything other than a public relations brick wall for the country’s ruling interests, the BBC has to reclaim political discourse for its audience. It has to present a deterrent to politicians who don’t answer questions.

Many people would like to see question dodgers hosed with cold water or electric shocked. The mischievous fantasist in me likes this idea too.

Realistically, our publicly funded broadcaster could – and should – simply ban from the airwaves politicians who don’t engage with their interlocutor by making direct responses to their enquiries.

The finer points can be ironed out later (how about a yellow/red card system adjudicated by a panel of linguistic experts?) But the essential point is that the BBC Trust – the same body that investigates bias – needs to deter politicians from fobbing us off, by making it politically inconvenient and embarrassing.

Sanctions would have a sudden and lasting effect: being sin-binned would be a newsworthy event, and there are only so many capable spokesmen on each side, so continual fouls would make parties field weaker spokespeople, lessening their chances of winning the agenda.

Obviously penalties would have to be applied fairly to all parties, and presenters would have to make sure they don't construct interviews out of closed – or as they've become known, "gotcha" – questions.

The corporation would also have to make a robust argument that banning politicians who don't play by the rules doesn't amount to "censorship," as they will no doubt squeal about. The Trust should point out that it's merely upholding a standard that is enshrined in the Royal Charter – that it shall make decisions "in the best interests of licence fee payers."

Don't dumb down

Ian McEwan



A while ago, as the earth passed close to the meteor shower known as the Perseid cloud, as it does every year, the following sentence appeared on the BBC news site. "Experts advise finding a dark location, away from artificial light, and an unobstructed view of the sky."

These words are probably untrue (a serious matter for a news service), for no expert would stoop to such fatuous and condescending advice. Unintended comedy apart, this counsel encapsulates reasonable jitters pervading the BBC. It remains the brilliant, indispensable part of our national culture. But the vultures in the form of commercial media interests and their friends in government are circling. They aim to dispose of the indispensable. In response, the Corporation sometimes twists itself into apologetic postures of bland populism. You hear it in the dead of night, in the chirpy upbeat electronic jingles separating half-bite-sized news tidbits, and in the three note call signs and drumbeat messages dramatising the one fact you do not need to know: that you're listening to the BBC World Service.

You hear it in the alteration of the simple, intimate format of the Reith lectures. Nothing wrong with the speakers (Atul Gawande, Stephen Hawking) but the cheery stage management of the presenter, the jolly atmosphere of Roadshow, the pre-arranged interventions from the audience, or the earnest applause of *Any Questions* have downgraded a noble institution. The fear, I would guess, is of that moron's call, the charge of elitism. Stand your ground, BBC. Don't duck – or the vultures will get you.

The BBC, the referendum and ‘post-truth politics’

Julian Petley

In its coverage of the EU referendum, the BBC stands widely accused of misinterpreting its statutory requirement to treat news and current affairs with “due impartiality” as an obligation to be “balanced”. As a result, as the writer and TV presenter David Cox has put it, “viewers and listeners seeking information were instead bombarded with contradictory and impenetrable claims and counter-claims” and were inadequately informed of the crucial issues involved.¹¹³ Significantly, such criticisms have been voiced even by broadcasters themselves, such as Justin Webb, presenter of Radio 4’s flagship news programme *Today* (2) who pointed out that “one of the clearest messages during the referendum campaign was that audiences were hungry for real knowledge.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, researchers at Cardiff University concluded that “our analysis of Referendum coverage suggests that, while broadcasters may have been even-handed in terms of giving both sides equal time, they could have more independently scrutinised, challenged or contextualised many of the facts and figures that were used repeatedly by both sides.”¹¹⁵ This is surely putting it pretty judiciously.

Of course, it needs to be stressed that once the referendum was announced, the BBC was put on notice by the usual bias bloodhounds that its coverage would be scrutinised even more doggedly than usual. Thus in June 2015, during the committee stage of the EU Referendum Bill, amendments were introduced by a UKIP peer and also by a group of diehard Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, which called for the appointment of a “referendum broadcasting adjudicator.”¹¹⁶ The then culture secretary, John Whittingdale, in letters to Ofcom and the BBC Trust, which were copied to the heads of ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky, made it clear that although the government would resist the amendment, “the coverage of this referendum by our broadcasters must be beyond reproach”, and consequently “I would encourage Ofcom and the BBC Trust as the responsible regulators to consider whether your respective processes for redress for complaints which are upheld are as efficient and timely as possible”. This warning was publicly amplified in an interview with Whittingdale by the staunchly anti-BBC *Telegraph* on 19 June, with the headline: “BBC Trust could be stripped of power to rule over allegations of bias, Culture Secretary says” and strapline: “In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, the new Culture Secretary hinted that an external regulator could be brought in to deal with issues of impartiality.”¹¹⁷

Lessons that must be learned

Whether or not the BBC succumbed to government and newspaper pressure in its coverage of the referendum is impossible to ascertain, but the very fact that it appeared so timorous and over-cautious is a matter of considerable concern. Thus the first lesson to draw from the Corporation's referendum coverage is the absolutely pressing need to defend the BBC's independence from government, particularly in the light of the White Paper's proposal that up to six members of the Corporation's new unitary board should be appointed by government.

The second lesson is that the BBC must do its utmost to prevent the news agenda being set by the dominant political voices of the day. That this is exactly what happens is amply confirmed by the 2012 Cardiff University study, *A BBC Trust Review of the Breadth of Opinion Reflected in the BBC's Output*¹¹⁸. This was most certainly the case during the referendum, in which, as has been widely noted, a multi-faceted and highly complex issue of fundamental importance to the future of the whole of the UK was increasingly presented by the media, not least the BBC, as a parochial, internal, Tory party squabble. And this in spite of the fact that the BBC's own Referendum Guidelines stated that:

*Due impartiality is not necessarily achieved by the application of a simple mathematical formula or a stopwatch, but the objective – in a referendum with two alternatives – must be to achieve a proper balance between the two sides. This will be irrespective of indications of relative levels of support. However, referendums are seldom fought purely on the basis of just two opposing standpoints – on each side, where there is a range of views or perspectives, that should be reflected appropriately during the campaign.*¹¹⁹

That the BBC signally failed to abide by these guidelines is amply confirmed by the findings of research undertaken by Loughborough University into BBC TV coverage of the referendum. Here the Conservatives (both Brexit and Remain) appeared most frequently (29.3%), Labour (mainly Remain) 10%, UKIP (Brexit) 4.2%, SNP (Remain) 0.7%, Lib-Dems (Remain) 0.7%, and other parties, including the Greens (Remain) 0.8%. Similarly, the most prominent issues in the BBC TV coverage were referendum conduct (28.9%), the economy/business (18.8%), immigration (15.6%), whilst other key issues were entirely marginalised or indeed ignored entirely: employment (3.4%), health (1.7%), housing (0.8%), devolution (1.5%), education (0.2%), the environment (0%)¹²⁰. No wonder, then, that many people are only now beginning to become aware of the possible impact of Brexit on their daily lives.

The third lesson concerns how the BBC deals with controversial subjects in general. The fundamental question here revolves around the range of views to which the Corporation should be giving voice. In his 2007 report for the BBC Trust, *From See-Saw to Wagonwheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century*, John Bridcut argued that:

*There are many issues where to hear “both sides of the case” is not enough: there are many more shades of opinion to consider ... parliament can no longer expect to define the parameters of national debate: it can sometimes instigate it, but more often it has to respond to currents of opinion already flowing freely on the internet and in the media. The world no longer waits on parliamentary utterance, and parliamentary consensus should never stifle the debate of topical issues on the BBC – because it does not always correspond with the different strands of public opinion.*¹²¹

However, the BBC seems largely to have ignored Bridcut's recommendations, or rather to have interpreted them as an argument for repeatedly inviting the leader of UKIP Nigel Farage onto *Question Time*, and doing so far more times than members of other minority parties, such as the Greens, and giving voice to “angry white men” in general¹²².

Nonetheless, if one agrees that the BBC should be giving space to a wider range of views, the question remains: which views? Just informed views? Or also ill-informed ones, which are held by significant numbers of people and amplified daily by populist, circulation-hungry newspapers? In this respect it should be noted that, in response to Professor Steve Jones' assessment of the accuracy and impartiality of BBC science coverage, the BBC Trust in 2011 agreed that “programme makers must make a distinction between well-established fact and opinion in science coverage and ensure the distinction is clear to the audience” and that “there should be no attempt to give equal weight to opinion and to evidence”. Or as Jones himself put it:

*Equality of voice calls for a match of scientists not with politicians or activists, but with those qualified to take a knowledgeable, albeit perhaps divergent, view of research. Attempts to give a place to anyone, however unqualified, who claims interest can make for false balance: to free publicity to marginal opinions and not to impartiality, but its opposite.*¹²³

There is surely every reason to apply such an approach to any other topic in which the actual facts of the case contradict mere opinion, or in which the majority of informed opinion significantly outweighs marginal opinion.

The alternative, as Professor Simon-Wren Lewis has repeatedly argued in his *Mainly Macro* blog¹²⁴, is that we end up with arguments along the lines of: “Shape of the earth: views differ”. This is the sure and certain way to what has been called “post-truth politics”, and the BBC should be resisting this with every fibre of its corporate body, not succumbing to its blandishments. As Martin Baron, the editor of the *Boston Globe* at the time that it unearthed the scandal of child abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in the city, has put it:

*We are living in a time when people can choose where they get their information. Choice is good. Yet people are turning to media outlets that are cynically propagating falsehoods to advance an ideological agenda. To an astonishing degree, people believe these falsehoods. They are drawn to them because they reinforce their pre-existing worldview. The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan liked to say, ‘Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.’ There was a time, not long ago, when we would differ on the interpretation of the facts. We would differ on the analysis. We would differ on prescriptions for our problems. But fundamentally we agreed on the facts. That was then. Today, many feel entitled to their own facts when, in actuality, they are lies. What has taken hold is an alternate reality, a virtual reality, where lies are accepted as truth and where conspiracy theories take root in the fertile soil of falsehoods.*¹²⁵

A megaphone for the press

The media outlets to which Baron is referring are digital platforms and social media, but in the UK the situation is further exacerbated by a national press which has for the most part entirely abandoned the proper functions of journalism and turned itself into a rabid and mendacious propaganda machine. Its truly execrable performance during the referendum was fully worthy of Joseph Goebbels. This has (very belatedly, in my view) helped to crystallise more general concerns about the possible effects on the broadcast agenda of a press whose news values are so heavily skewed not simply to the Tories but the Tory Right on virtually every major issue of the day¹²⁶

One immediate and obvious solution here is to halt the practice of presenters reading out newspaper headlines on programmes such as *Today* and *Newsnight*, thus broadcasting their propagandist messages to a far wider audience than just the self-selecting readers of those papers. That this practice blithely continued during the referendum campaign quite simply beggars belief, given the nature of the headlines in the *Sun*, *Express* and *Mail* in particular, which were nothing less than a national and journalistic scandal. For example,

front pages which entirely abandoned news in favour of comment, such as the huge *Sun* headline on 14 June, “BeLeave in Britain” (with “Leave” decked out in red, white and blue), and the *Mail*’s “Who Will Speak for England?” on 4 February.

A second step should be to insist that BBC news staff rely far less on newspapers as sources for stories. Anybody who has ever entered a BBC newsroom will surely have been struck by the vast amount of newsprint lying about and being pored over. Obviously BBC journalists have in recent years suffered significant cuts in numbers, but, even so, the Corporation is still a huge news-gathering organisation by any standards, and should be far less dependent on other media sources. As Meirion Jones has pointed out¹²⁷, the BBC employs more journalists (4,000) than any other media outlet in Britain, yet many of them have gone through their whole careers without breaking a story. Jones argues convincingly for the establishment of an investigations unit at the BBC, but there is surely also a need for something much more fundamental, namely independent newsgathering. Worryingly, however, Jones notes that “the BBC’s official motto is ‘nation shall speak peace unto nation’ but the unofficial second line is ‘and decide how little the people should be told about what’s really going on’”.

The usual pat BBC answer to this complaint is that its journalists don’t treat those stories in the same biased fashion as do the newspapers from which they come, but this is simply to ignore the surely elementary point that many stories which appear in right-wing papers are stories only by the ideological standards of those papers. In other words, the papers’ ideology has dictated not only the *treatment* of the story but its very *selection* in the first place: the “Euromyths” which have populated so many British paper for years, courtesy of Boris Johnson in the first place¹²⁸, providing a particularly clear example of this process at work.

The deeply worrying picture which emerges from the BBC’s coverage of the referendum is one of profound loss: in particular loss of independence and loss of nerve, adding up to a general loss of agency, one which cannot be explained simply by the haemorrhaging of journalistic talent in recent years. Something far deeper is at work here, and it needs urgently to be addressed in the course of the Charter renewal process.

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evidence to the Leveson Inquiry.

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Free your staff to voice their opinions

Peter Hitchens



The BBC should grasp that impartiality cannot be achieved by people with opinions pretending not to have them. The Corporation should free its own staff to express their true opinions openly, as most of them do without realising it in their attempts at 'impartial' reporting and presenting anyway, through selection of material, tone of voice, use of

loaded verbs (e.g. 'insist' or 'claim' instead of 'say') adjectives ('extremist', 'right-wing') and nouns ('progress' and 'investment' where 'spending' would be more accurate). It should recruit such staff more widely and use the adversarial system on major current affairs programmes such as 'Today', so that – for instance – no major political figure would ever again be interviewed by a sympathiser. The Corporation should possess at least one interviewer, which at present is not the case, who can grill an opponent of capital punishment or supporter of manmade climate change.

Peter Hitchens is a journalist and author. His most recent book is *The War We Never Fought: The British Establishment's Surrender to Drugs*.

Bringing investigations back to the BBC

Meirion Jones

The BBC has more journalists than any other media outlet in Britain, but out of those 4,000 men and women, yes 4,000, precisely none of them work in an investigations unit. The *Sunday Times*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph* and *Mail* have far fewer journalists between them but they all maintain centralized investigations units.

At the same time the BBC thinks it right to employ between 150 and 200 press officers. Yes, the BBC's budget is being squeezed mercilessly, but it is about priorities. Newspaper hacks are judged by their ability to find news. They complain that many BBC journalists go through whole careers without breaking a story.

Back in the 2000s I was asked to draw up a plan for a BBC investigations unit, to take on the papers. I wasn't necessarily interested in running it but I was interested in writing the blueprint and working in it. It was because we had created something similar on a smaller scale at the BBC's 'flagship' current affairs show *Newsnight*. I had previously worked in radio (on *Today*, *World at One* and *PM*) and on moving to *Newsnight* I was shocked at how little journalism TV producers really did. The production demands of television meant that booking guests, getting crew to the right places, finding pictures and ordering graphics took precedence over finding out what the story was.

Some of the reporters had managed to carve out a little space to follow their own leads on occasions, and I decided to invent the post of Investigations Producer and appoint myself to it. My logic was that if it was a success, the bosses would go along with it and take the credit.

It is not that the BBC doesn't have brilliant journalists, it does, and I've been lucky enough to work with them on *Newsnight* and the documentary programme *Panorama*. Their foreign correspondents are excellent at flying in to stories as they happen around the world, and making you care about what's happening thousands of miles away. The producers also put their lives on the line to make that happen. The Home Affairs Unit is packed with people who have the ability and aptitude to dig, but all too often are dragged into just feeding the sausage machine with agenda stories. There are individuals scattered in radio and TV programmes, in the regions, and all over the institution, who are trying to do investigations

often in their spare time and with little support. Typically managers see them as a problem.

Even *Panorama*, which was once seen as a primarily investigative programme, now spends much of its time on analysis, although it still occasionally makes great programmes like the undercover investigation into G4S's cruelty to youth inmates.

BBC managers like on-agenda stories that can be planned ahead. Court cases, parliamentary debates, press-released events and reports all appear on diaries weeks ahead. They are predictable and if you spend the time and money you will always get something you can put on air, and the people you do stories about are usually happy. Their PR teams will invite you to flash lunches and the best corporate Christmas bashes.

Investigations aren't like that. They are hassle. You're more likely to get named on a writ than invited to the party. You might spend the money and get nothing, or be stopped by the lawyers from broadcasting a scoop. If you broadcast, you will be attacked by your targets, and accused of bias. You may be dragged through the courts and tied up in the internal complaints machinery, sometimes for years, and then there's the BBC Trust as a final pointless court of appeal. The sooner the Trust is abolished and the BBC brought under OFCOM, like other broadcasters, the better.

As Investigations Producer at *Newsnight*, I had space to make investigations a core part of the programme, pulling in great reporters and screening them from the demands of daily coverage, sometimes getting a leaked report on a running story to feed into that night's *Newsnight*, or spending a couple of weeks on something more substantial, but simultaneously working on complex investigations which could take a year.

This is what a BBC investigation unit would also have to do. It would need to feed into daily programmes but also come up with the big sledgehammer stories. It would need a core team of experienced investigative journalists, but others who had good ideas, or great contacts, could be attached to the unit for as long as it took to get the story out there. You wouldn't want a hard wall between the investigators and other journalists. You would want to encourage every journalist to chase stories and help them do that.

I had already put together resources on the web, primarily aimed at new BBC journalists but available to all, on how to do investigations, as well as running classes for the BBC College of Journalism and others.

But the proposal for an investigations unit foundered at an early stage amongst infighting

about who would run it and where the budget would come from. From the outside, the BBC looks like a monolith, but inside it is more like *Game of Thrones* with feuding factions fighting for power, and neglecting the White Walkers gathering at Westminster.

The BBC is culturally inclined against investigations. The BBC's official motto is "nation shall speak peace unto nation" but the unofficial second line is "and decide how little the people should be told about what's really going on". Newspapers, and other broadcasters like Channel 4, trust their lawyers to keep an eye on any compliance issues. The BBC has all that and another layer of control, the Editorial Policy unit (Ed Pol), intended to provide guidelines, but often seen by journalists as unnecessarily interfering and obstructing. One time when I was investigating sex assaults in schools Ed Pol told me I couldn't knock on the door of a paedophile (who had been convicted the previous year), because it would be infringing his human rights.

With the BBC's byzantine management structure no-one knows who is really in control. At one point I watched three different managers in Current Affairs, above Editor level, independently rewriting script lines in a *Panorama*. But if everyone's responsible, no-one's responsible, which means that on the big decisions, like killing the important [Jimmy Savile investigation](#), or running the McAlpine allegations without checking, the BBC makes disastrous calls. Jimmy Savile was one of the BBC's most popular DJs and TV performers. Twenty million would watch his shows. In secret he was also one of Britain's most prolific paedophiles. I led the team that made the 2011 *Newsnight* investigation to reveal this abuse, which was then pulled, plunging the BBC into four years of scandals. The latest this week was the [leaking](#) of a BBC report, the Janet Smith review, which showed that members of the BBC's management knew as early as 1973.

There's another problem. Investigations aim to hold power to account, and one of the most powerful institutions is the government. People ask me is the BBC biased, and my answer is that the fundamental corporate bias is pro-government, regardless of party. It's the licence fee – stupid. Of course not every story will be pro-government but the overwhelming narrative will be.

When I was on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme in the late '80s I'd regularly get calls from Margaret Thatcher's party chairman, Norman Tebbit, while the programme was on air. He'd ring up to try to influence the daily agenda. Alistair Campbell and his merry men were equally effective under Tony Blair and their humbling of the BBC after the [David Kelly affair](#) only made the corporation more submissive. And now there's a Tory government so the

BBC is pro-Tory. Take the [junior doctors' strike](#) this month. *Newsnight*, to its credit, ran a MORI poll showing 66% public in favour, 18% against. But on the day of the action *Today* trawled for anti-strike patients, and the BBC *News at Ten* ran two negative voices from ordinary people, and no one in favour.

The only periods when I saw the BBC's loyalty to the government wavering was under John Major after Black Wednesday, and during the Gordon Brown administration. In each case a cynic might say the corporation could see the PMs were dead on their feet, and the other side was about to be elected and control the BBC purse strings.

Increasingly new media, including Buzzfeed, Vice, and Exaro are outflanking traditional outlets on investigations. Not everything they do will be good, but it is a real challenge. And it is not just new journalism outlets but other opinion shapers advancing into the investigations area which has been vacated by the BBC.

I spent the last six months helping Greenpeace set up an investigations unit, and they won't be the last charity to do that. It makes you go back to basics and think what is needed, what resources, what framework, how do you treat whistleblowers, what should the rules be? Essentially we came to the conclusion that at Greenpeace there should always be a discussion about whether an investigation was in the public interest and whether that justified any subterfuge like deception or secret recording. But the new media, and organisations new to this field like Greenpeace are not regulated as tightly as public broadcasters.

They do have the capability to go out on fishing expeditions where they think, but can't prove, that wrongdoing has happened, and go and find the evidence. They're not scared of what they'll find out. As the BBC retreats into caution, the new wave can beat them to the stories, although they may need to partner old media to get the coverage, as Buzzfeed did with the [Tennis match-fixing story](#).

Greenpeace will back whistleblowers a hundred per cent, but alarmingly the BBC now throws them to the wolves. Karin Ward was the first of Jimmy Savile's victims to go on camera and blow the whistle. We interviewed her in 2011 and she was let down when *Newsnight* pulled our Savile film. She was let down again after appearing on the *Panorama* programme 'Jimmy Savile: what the BBC knew'. She was sued for libel by comedian Freddie Starr, who was on Savile's show, for comments she made on the programme. Last July, a high court judge threw out the libel case and said he categorically believed Karin Ward and the other women who testified.

All the time I worked at the BBC I was able to say to whistleblowers “if you’re sued for libel for what you say on our programme the BBC will back you in court”. But in this case, the BBC threw all that trust away by leaving Karin in the lurch, giving her no financial support in a libel case that cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. The message to whistleblowers was “you can no longer trust the BBC to back you”.

So how can the BBC get back into investigations? In my view they need to apologise to Karin and guarantee support to whistleblowers, and scrap the Editorial Policy unit and the BBC Trust. Finally, they need set up a proper investigations unit funded by cuts in the press office and the other futile departments, and fully back those brilliant investigative journalists who are left in the corporation.

4. How to be Public in the Market

All of this means little, perhaps, if we cannot find a way for the BBC to sustain itself as a public service broadcaster within the marketplace. Des Freedman starts this section by putting the commercial and government pressure on the BBC to justify its size and scale into the big picture: Britain is part of a European-wide trend in which public service media is shrinking, while commercial revenue grows. Mariana Mazzucato and Cian O'Donovan also reject the 'crowding out' theory. They propose a new framework for evaluating the BBC, looking at its role in shaping the market and creating new market landscapes.

The repeated use of 'distinctiveness' in the government's White Paper has worried many, and Mike Flood Page argues that the BBC must defend to the death its right to entertain. Fiona Chesterton sets out the risks of what she calls 'putting the BBC back in its box', seeing the proposed Public Service Content Fund and the BBC Studios as part of this trend.

Nonsense! says David Elstein. Public service broadcasters have been guilty of a steady downward slope of delivery - look at the state of UK originations and key public service genres like arts and education. While a small one is proposed, a larger contestable Public Service Content Fund is urgently required, along with other reforms that have been resisted at great cost. Aaron Bastani also proposed a larger contestable fund, to include news and current affairs, and 're-think' PSB for the 21st century.

Through her exploration of recipe-gate, Lis Howell shows how an attempt to distinguish between public interest and commercial content in BBC generates absurdities.. And Allyson Pollock calls on the Corporation to dictate its own terms in such disputes, and defend its vital role in Britain's media ecology. Attacks on it are "either commercial envy or naked ideology" says Philip Pullman - the BBC's accomplishments are astonishing, although it should add a TV programme dedicated to books and the rapidly shifting literary market.

The growing gap between private and public in European broadcasting

Des Freedman

One of the great distinguishing features of the government's consultation on the future of the BBC was its emphasis on 'scale and scope' and its presupposition that the BBC is the single great behemoth of the UK media landscape. It invited comments about the extent to which 'the public would be better served by a more focused range of BBC services' and echoed the argument that 'the level of public funding gives the BBC an unfair advantage and distorts audience share in a way that undermines commercial business models.' It followed this up in its white paper with an almost unhealthy obsession with 'distinctiveness' – there are more references to that particular concept than there are to 'public service' in the document – interpreted as the need not to unnecessarily replicate the popular content produced by its commercial rivals.

This is, of course, far from the first criticism of the BBC for over-reaching itself and for relying on populist formats of which *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The Great British Bake-Off* seem to be the most visible recent examples. A whole host of broadcasters and public figures – including Jeremy Paxman, David Jason, Ann Widdecombe, Jonathan Dimbleby and the former head of programmes at ITV David Liddiment – have all previously accused the BBC of having an unhealthy obsession with ratings. Indeed, the current chair of Ofcom, Patricia Hodgson, made a famous speech back in 2002 when she was the chief executive of the Independent Television Commission berating the BBC for its occasional lack of focus: 'Beating ITV with [David Attenborough's] *Blue Planet* is a triumph. Beating it with *Celebrity Sleepover* is a tragedy.'¹²⁹ The difference between then and now, however, is that Hodgson also insisted that BBC programmes should actually aim to be popular: 'where's the public service in being anything else?'

The problem is that the white paper has 'weaponised' distinctiveness: what ought to be a fairly innocuous term designating the obligation for the BBC to provide creative and original content has been turned into a veiled threat not to be too popular, thereby treading on the toes of its competitors in the private sector. The impact would be to diminish the BBC in the domestic media environment but also to undermine its ability to develop popular formats and programmes for the international market – and then to re-invest these revenues back into its

core services.

Of course it is entirely appropriate that our attention is firmly focused on an institution that plays such a crucial role in British public life, except that we should be far more concerned about its performance than its size. Indeed, if the main issue is about size, regulators should be more worried about Sky, whose revenues far outstrip those of the BBC and whose income is set to grow over the next few years. Enders Analysis estimates that by 2026, subscription revenue will account for 44 per cent of the TV market in contrast to a mere 12 per cent taken up by funds available for the BBC.¹³⁰ Similarly, the graph in the [white paper](#) showing that the BBC 'is the best-funded public service broadcaster in Europe'¹³¹ is a little misleading in that the £3.7 billion of licence funding in the UK is overshadowed by the £5 billion that German public service broadcasters receive from household fee payments.¹³²

The emphasis on the size of the BBC masks a very significant development that provides a more meaningful context for the debate on its future. Namely, the decline in funding for the vast majority of public service broadcasters across Europe in the face of a substantial rise in revenue for commercial groups. The policy context we face Europe-wide is of a growing gap between commercial organisations and public service operators.

Figures from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) in 2014 showed that the top five private companies (Liberty, BSkyB, RTL, Mediaset and Canal+) have same revenue (€33 billion) as the fifty-seven members of the EBU.¹³³ Many EBU members are experiencing severe economic difficulties, including cuts to 2012-13 budgets of over 40 per cent in Georgia, 27 per cent in Serbia and more than 20 per cent in Cyprus and Albania, let alone the closure of whole stations in Greece and Spain (although the Greek state broadcaster is now back on air). Meanwhile, the top twelve European commercial media groups continue to see substantial growth in their revenues: in 2013, their total revenue increased by 4.8 per cent, while revenue for all the public service operators dropped by 4 per cent.

In other words, we are seeing a heavily polarised broadcast environment in which income for the top twelve commercial media groups in Europe is now more than 50 per cent greater than *total* public service media income. What is revealing is that this gap has nearly doubled in the last five years: in 2008, just before the crash, it was 27.6 per cent, while in 2013, commercial broadcasters earned more than 51.4 per cent more than their public service counterparts. While public service revenue declined by 8.7 per cent between 2008-13, commercial groups saw their revenue grow by precisely the same amount, suggesting that they were profiting handsomely from the austerity-induced problems of their public rivals.

In the five major European markets listed in the EBU research, the largest commercial operators all have more revenue than total PSM revenue. This includes the UK, where BSkyB's revenue of 8.5 billion Euros is 20 per cent greater than the combined revenue of the BBC, Channel 4 and S4C. Actually the gap is even bigger in France, Spain, Italy and Sweden. In Spain, PRISA's revenue is more than double that of the public service broadcaster RTVE. According to the report's author, Roberto Suarez, these figures provide clear evidence that public service media 'are not a threat to a healthy market, free competition and the development of commercial initiatives.'¹³⁴

Yet this is rarely the story that is told and, at least in the UK, it is certainly not the one that appears to be driving policy. In fact, ministers and commercial lobbyists seem determined to scale back the operations of public service operators, whether through cuts to the BBC, the privatisation of Channel 4 or a change of ownership for ITV.

One may respond that there is little to worry about so long as declines in public service broadcasting budgets are offset by a growth in spending of commercial groups. The evidence suggests, however, that this is not likely to happen – at least in one particularly important area: the production of original national TV content. Public service broadcasters play a key role here because their content spend as a share of revenue is far higher than their non-regulated rivals. For example, while Channel 4 devotes some 64 per cent of its revenue to content, with the BBC and ITV following behind with 57 per cent and 50 per cent respectively, HBO and Sky spend just over a third of revenue on content. A reduction in the money available to PSBs to spend would especially hit *original* content given the fact that they provide a disproportionate amount: over £2.5 billion in contrast to the £350 million spent by commercial groups in the UK as estimated by Ofcom.¹³⁵

This is a pattern replicated across Europe where, according to Analysys Mason, original content is 'mainly funded by public and commercial-free to air (FTA) channels' whose 'potential financial weakness could have a serious impact on European TV production.'¹³⁶ This appears to be borne out by Ofcom's figures in relation to original UK content where there has been a dramatic fall¹³⁷ in spending on key genres including comedy, arts, music, religion and education – genres that are at heart of an inclusive public service remit.

Analysys Mason's concern is that most FTA channels – the majority of which are public service broadcasters – are facing 'revenue stagnation' which is severely affecting their ability to commission high-quality original national content and to provide publics with free access to key sporting events. In 2015, Discovery won the rights to the Winter and Summer

Olympics between 2018 and 2024, which led the EBU to call for Europe-wide regulatory action to ensure free-to-air sports reception with consequential impacts on participation and public health.¹³⁸ In a situation in which the average monthly cost of public service media is 3.14 Euros in contrast to pay TV's average monthly revenue per user of 19.9 Euros, PSBs are not in a position to exert the financial clout needed to secure premium sports rights. According to the EBU, 'sporting events of major importance to society should be available to all on a free-to-air basis to underpin social cohesion.'¹³⁹

In conclusion, there is no longer a level playing field in European broadcasting. Revenues – and possibly therefore the influence – of commercial groups increasingly outstrip those of public service broadcasters. Critical responses to the future of the BBC, as well as to developments elsewhere in Europe, need to focus on the measures necessary both to arrest the decline in PSB funding and to improve the independence of public service operators, not least because of the increasing encroachment of authoritarian governments into the public service broadcasting sector.¹⁴⁰ We need to move away from the current neoliberal terms of debate over 'size' and to ensure that public discussion and policy action is dictated not by an ideological predisposition to shrink the public sector and to grow its commercial rivals, but by one that is aimed at building robust and well resourced public broadcast systems.

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Remind us why public service matters

Allyson Pollock



The BBC is a public service, it is also a universal service. The BBC should remind people why public services are important and the range of programmes that the BBC has provided, the people it has served and innovative and creative programming it has given rise to. It should show what is at stake: people will be denied access to services – and a voice – if reporting is left solely to commercial channels.

Anyone who has spent any time in North America understands the corporate capture of news, the degradation of investigative reporting and current affairs programmes, and the degeneration of public broadcasting through spending cuts. Five conglomerates – Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann of Germany, and Viacom (formerly CBS) – control most of the newspapers, magazines, books, radio and TV stations, movie studios, and much of the web news content of the United States. They are in large measure responsible for instilling and imprinting the social, political, economic, and moral values of both adults and children in the United States. Ben Bagdikian's book *The New Media Monopoly* is a brilliant and chilling account of what is at stake. It is an excellent starting point for an informed debate about the future of the BBC and the kinds of programming we want.

Over the last 20 years the BBC has already been subject to significant cuts and a high degree of marketisation. It has experimented with internal markets and new public management and competition, the effects of which are poorly understood.

Corporate capture of public services is not new, but the BBC should open up the debate as to why public broadcasting is important at all levels, international, national and even local. It should loudly proclaim why independent broadcasting is vital and why – most importantly – private corporations should not own and control every media outlet. Independent thinking and reporting needs to flourish in order for society to thrive, and the importance of public ownership and public accountability in making this possible should be debated and understood.

So the BBC should face this threat openly and play its role in ensuring that there is an

informed public debate, properly funded too, about why public broadcasting is so crucial for a healthy society and why it should matter to us all.

Allyson Pollock is an academic and author. Her books include *NHS Plc: The Privatisation of our Healthcare*.

The BBC as market shaper and creator

Mariana Mazzucato, Cian O'Donovan

An earlier version of this article was first published on the LSE Media Policy Project Blog. ¹⁴¹

At the heart of the government's White Paper on the future of the BBC is an implicit accusation that the broadcaster is 'crowding out' the market through the scale and quality of its services. The White Paper seeks to build a new charter that challenges (and potentially limits) the scope of public service broadcasters, allowing greater room for private sector players. The government's primary strategy in this regard is its 'distinctiveness' agenda which seeks to evaluate content and content creation activities. This agenda represents a substantial and ongoing potential threat to the BBC and other public service broadcasters, such as Channel 4. In this piece we focus on the critique that the BBC is 'crowding out' private broadcasters. Rather than beginning with a market failure framework, which sees public organizations—such as the BBC— as only relevant in their capacity to fix market failures (such as public goods that are not invested in by the private sector), we view the BBC through a market creation and market shaping framework. We argue that the criteria for evaluating and assessing public organizations that stem from such a framework are very different from those that stem from a market failure one.

The BBC is accused of 'stealing' audience from private broadcasters, diminishing potential income from advertising (or subscription) and, consequently, private investments. If the BBC is to be blamed for 'crowding out' private broadcasters, it is necessary to prove that the private broadcasters would engage in the part of the broadcasting landscape that the BBC has dared to occupy. Recent research shows this perspective to be flawed.¹⁴² In short, there is a finite pool of advertising pounds available within the UK and were the BBC not to exist, this limited pool would not and could not increase to fill the void.¹⁴³

Furthermore, this defence does not account for the fact that businesses are often risk-averse and unwilling (or unable) to transform existing landscapes, or indeed create new ones. For example, in 2012, BBC TV invested 56 pence of every pound of revenue in first-run UK content. The equivalent figures were 44 pence for the commercial public service broadcasters (based on total PSB revenues) and a meagre 7 pence for the rest of the commercial sector.¹⁴⁴ Yet if the BBC is to robustly defend itself from the charge of crowding out, it needs not only strong counterfactual evidence such as the example above, but also a

framework to more accurately assess its contribution to industry and society within the UK and abroad.

The 'crowding out' argument is based on a framework which sees public services in general, and the BBC in particular, as a means of last resort. Their role is not to compete (in the production of higher quality goods and services) but rather to limit their activity to addressing market failures. Market failures arise if there are positive externalities such as public goods, or negative externalities such as pollution. But the use of market failure theory here is misplaced as it does not capture the BBC's leadership role in the UK's incredibly vibrant culture industry—producing high quality affordable services, with a strong notion of public value that goes beyond a notion of public good. The assumption is that there is an existing market, and if the BBC takes a larger chunk of it, or one not tackling a particular public good problem, there is less left for the private sector, and this leads to criticisms that active public organizations like the BBC not only crowd out but also stifle innovation. The kind of public value that the BBC has produced cannot be captured by the narrow economic definition of the *public good*, which assumes an existing market which is 'fixed' by the public sector due to under-investments by the private sector. Yes, the private sector tends to under-invest in non-commercial areas, but this does not mean that the public sector cannot go transform areas that are normally considered to be commercial (e.g. soap operas and talk shows). Precisely in order to reach a wider audience, and have social impact, a public broadcaster can and should reach out with transformational messages through traditional channels. Other wise the risk is that it remains in a small elite corner of the market, as is often the case in other countries. In other words, public value is a more dynamic concept than public good, focussed on the process by which value is generated in social and collective ways. As Barry Bozeman writes: "Public values are those providing normative consensus about (a) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; (b) the obligations of citizens to society, the state, and one another; (c) and the principles on which governments and policies should be based."¹⁴⁵

Key here is understanding how, as emphasized in Mazzucato's book *The Entrepreneurial State*, the public sector not only 'de-risks' the private sector by sharing its risk, it often 'leads the way' setting the direction of change, and courageously taking on risk that the private sector fears.¹⁴⁶ Thus rather than analysing public sector investment via the need to correct 'market failures', it is necessary to build a theory of how the public sector shapes and creates markets—as it has done in the history of the IT revolution, but also that of biotechnology, nanotechnology, and in the emerging landscape of green technology. Indeed, the BBC is a perfect example of an organization that by remaining ahead of the game, investing in its own competencies and capabilities, has been able to attract top talent, and steer, shape and create new market landscapes and opportunities for both public and private actors.

So how can we assess how the BBC's ability to de-risk the private sector, as well as to create new market landscapes? Four steps are required, based on a new paper by Mazzucato.¹⁴⁷:

(1) Setting Directions. First we need to understand how the BBC can be assessed in terms of setting the direction of change and innovation in the broadcasting industry; that is, shaping and creating markets rather than just fixing them. We call this directionality, and it starts with understanding the public policy underpinning the BBC, namely its charter and the underlying interests and politics which influence its creation and its continued activities. The BBC's charter has the ability to enhance or limit the scope of the strategies, activities and content of our public broadcasters.

(2) Building a Learning Organisation. How should the BBC be structured as an organisation, so it accommodates risk taking and the explorative capacity and capabilities needed to manage contemporary challenges in a rapidly changing media landscape? This is about assessing which capabilities and structures are necessary to increase the chances that the BBC will be effective at learning and growing symbiotic partnerships with the private sector, as well as at implementing its mission.

(3) Portfolios. Some failure is an integral part of the innovation process. The BBC, backed by its decades-long Reithian mission to inform, educate and entertain, is well-primed for longer-term development cycles. From the BBC Micro project (which taught a generation of school children to code) to Stagebox (designed to link up production teams over the internet) via iPlayer and Ingex recording hardware, BBC innovation has demonstrated an ability to not

only contribute to its own bottom line, but to the skills and capabilities of the industry and society. But innovation requires risk taking and this means occasional failure. The White Paper ignores this by downplaying the role of communications technologies and innovation. Innovation, promotion and delivery of 'emerging communications technologies and services' are one of a set of core 'public purposes' in the current charter, but have been removed from the new White Paper. Rather than obsessing about failures and the effect on the bottom line, often evaluated through narrowly defined cost benefit analysis which fail to account for much of the upside of innovation, more attention is needed on how to structure the portfolio of investments across the risk landscape. Such a structure would facilitate learning from failures, and enable greater capture of value from the upside so that downside risks can be covered, and the next round of investments better secured.

(4) New Metrics. It is important to use proper metrics, not ideology, to evaluate the BBC. The challenge and opportunity this presents is to consider what type of metrics might be used to describe this landscape and the BBC's activities within it, not in terms of 'fixing' market failures, but in terms of shaping and creating markets. This requires finding a way to capture the 'social value' created that goes beyond the narrow economics concept of a 'public good', which would see the BBC focusing only on programmes that tend to attract those who are already have access to most of society's 'cultural capital'. Here lies an opportunity for the BBC and its defenders to transform static metrics of cost benefit analysis into dynamic ones which can illustrate the quality of the BBC's content, innovation (including spillovers) and contribution to its audience and society—regardless of whether the programme in question is a soap opera, a children's programme, or a documentary on climate change.

Indeed, the White Paper tasks the BBC board with "encouraging risk-taking and supporting creative ambition amongst the strong creative talent at the BBC" (p. 37). The starting point for evaluating the BBC's content and activities is the regulatory structure, and here the government proposes a fundamental shift. The BBC Trust is to be dissolved with regulatory functions to be taken over by Ofcom, the UK's communications competition authority which was originally set up to promote commercial competition. It is not clear if a regulatory body established for adjudicating commercial complaints, has the metrics or organisational means by which to adequately evaluate the BBC's diverse range of activities. The danger according to Des Freedman, Professor at Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, is "that Ofcom may now be asked to preside over endless complaints from the BBC's commercial rivals that it is not sufficiently "distinctive" – especially when its content or services interfere with the profits of its rivals".¹⁴⁸

If we are to take seriously the task of evaluating the BBC's total market creation contribution, there is no single metric that can distinguish the public value of the BBC's *Happy Valley* from ITV's *Broadchurch*. This must account for broadcast metrics and measures of innovation (format and technology), as well as the capabilities, capacity for learning and the network of links between the BBC and the hundreds of small and large private firms it works with throughout the broadcast and production sectors. Indeed, if the BBC is allowed to continue challenging the status quo, pushing market frontiers and attentive to providing a universal service to all British citizens, it can create a more dynamic and competitive environment for all. In sum, there is a need to build a more symbiotic landscape, with less fear of crowding out and more courage to shape and build new markets, which ultimately benefit citizens as well as businesses able to absorb the spillovers. For this to happen, we need to reinvigorate the notion of Public Value, that goes beyond a narrow concept of the Public Good which is currently serving to limit the role of the public sector in narrow spaces, that prevent exactly the types of investments the BBC has historically made in order to become a leader in public broadcasting. The BBC, as a UK and global leader of content and innovation, is ideally located to foster such dynamism.

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Bring literature to the public

Philip Pullman



In general, the BBC should continue to remind people of the enormous range of programmes that it puts out, and the sheer value of the 40p a day that the licence fee represents. That is the truly astonishing accomplishment of the corporation. Attacks on it should be shown up vigorously and at once for what they are: either commercial envy or naked ideology.

But there are particular things it must do too. For instance, it must plug a hole that it's allowed to appear. There should be a regular, by which I mean weekly, programme about books, and it should be on BBC2. Melvyn Bragg's 'Read All About It' was excellent in its day, but the world of books and reading has changed and is still changing rapidly, and a new programme should look at some aspects of the book world beyond the latest bestsellers or critically acclaimed literary fiction. What is the effect of Amazon on bookselling and publishing? Should we bring back a form of Net Book Agreement? What new publishers are coming up, and what sort of books are they producing? What is the truth about vanishing libraries? How do authors earn a living? A small (5 minute) spot in a 45-minute programme could look at a different background issue every week.

But mainly it would look at books: new books, classic books, children's books, bestsellers, prize winners, graphic novels, the whole gamut. Lively critical attention is what we want. Reading is one of the most popular occupations in the country, literature is this nation's greatest cultural achievement, and the best broadcasting organisation in the world has no TV programme dedicated to books. It's time it did.

Philip Pullman([@PhilipPullman](#)) is a novelist and advocate of the literary imagination

Let's not shatter the fragile ecology of British broadcasting

Fiona Chesterton

One of Britain's dwindling number of iconic international brands? Or a bloated and over-mighty corporation that needs putting firmly back in its box? If you read much of the British media, and indeed the government's own White Paper, you will see the debate on the BBC is framed largely within the latter perspective. If you think of the global success of *Sherlock*, *The Night Manager*, *Strictly Come Dancing* (aka *Dancing with the Stars*) not forgetting of course the still widely-admired news coverage, you might be inclined towards the former view.

In this chapter, I will warn of the risks to the BBC of the 'putting it back in its box' approach and argue that there needs to be a much broader debate about the future of public service broadcasting in the UK within the context of an ever-more globalized media landscape. For it is not just the BBC that finds itself on the defensive. Channel 4 – a unique, if less universally-recognized public service broadcaster and media brand – has also had to argue for the continuation of its status as a public corporation, against a government that was intent on some style of privatisation. The immediate threat to Channel 4's status may have receded with the new May Cabinet but who knows if it will return.

Unlike the debate around the BBC's future, there has been relatively little around Channel 4 and its place in the broader British media ecology. Yet the Channel has a unique status having had, like the BBC, the concept of public service broadcasting at its heart from its inception but combined with a funding formula based on advertising. As a former BBC producer and commissioning editor at both the BBC and Channel 4, I have always viewed them as complementary and not just competitive organisations.

David Elstein argues in his chapter that private ownership and public service content are not necessarily at odds. He recalls the glory days of the ITV companies pre-2000, companies which were from the start commercial entities and which produced, under the aegis of firm regulation, a wealth of programming with public purposes. Yet he also demonstrates how in the past decade or so the balance between commercial success and public service obligation under the aegis of 'light-touch' regulation has tipped firmly towards the former.

With ITV now possibly a target for a takeover by a non-UK based media owner, and many of our most successful formerly independent producers also becoming part of more globally

focused organisations, the old broadcasting ecology built round public service values seems ever more fragile.

Children's programming: a case in point

Children's programming is a prime example of why it is unhelpful to look at the BBC in isolation and where the globalizing trends are most apparent.

For the past decade, OFCOM has chronicled the steady decline of first run UK- produced originations and the virtual abandonment of factual content for young audiences by the commercial broadcasters with public service obligations. At the last count, this was down 45 per cent over the decade. Despite its budget challenges, ninety per cent of what is commissioned comes from the BBC.

This sorry state of affairs is not due to the competition being 'crowded' out by the BBC. It is more that the UK broadcasters abandoned this particular field. The economic climate, they would argue, was hostile – given the loss of advertising revenues due to the restriction on junk food advertising in 2008, followed by the long recession. So far, there is little sign of them returning to the field although the global players, like Netflix and Disney, are investing huge amounts in entertainment content for children.

So, does the White Paper encourage the BBC to grow its children's production? Are there other new measures to protect the range and diversity of UK- produced content for children generally?

Well, there is a proposal to remove any protection for BBC in-house production and open up all its commissions to competition from indies. There are some good arguments for this, but as we will argue later, it may significantly destabilize that production base – without increasing the total volume and range of output.

The White Paper's second idea to boost spend and range of children's programming, through a new Public Service Content Fund, might also seem initially sensible. Yet this too can be better seen as part of the larger strategy to 'put the BBC back in its box' rather than as a way of increasing the total pot available for children's TV production. The pilot for the fund would use £20m from a underspend following a previous Government raid on the licence fee and could surely only be sustained by further raids, so-called 'top slicing'.

It's also unlikely that this will really make much of an impact on the overall spend on

originated children's content production when the fund seemingly has to also come to the rescue of a whole range of so-called 'underserved' genres including religion and ethics, arts and classical music, formal educational content, plus content for 'underserved' audiences including BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) and for the Nations and Regions... etc etc. Then there's the overhead costs of even a modest new organization to be factored in.

Rather than this elaborate new scheme, wouldn't it be simpler to follow a different route. Say, give stability to Channel 4 by putting to bed the idea of privatization once and for all, and in return encourage – and, if necessary, enforce – its regulatory requirement to provide bespoke content for older children as well as their more mainstream content for a broader young audience? As Karen Brown and I argued in *What Price Channel 4?*,¹⁴⁹ the Channel's brand positions it much better than the BBC's to reach that audience. So let's see them really rise to that challenge in the coming years.

BBC Studios: a failure in waiting?

As we have seen in the case of children's content, one of the White Paper's major changes is to throw BBC in-house production open to the full force of independent competition (with the sole exception of News and News-related Current Affairs).

The White Paper also gives its blessing in principle to the hiving off of the major production activities of the BBC, both TV and Radio, into a commercial division called BBC Studios, provided of course that is deemed not to be in any way anti-competitive ('keep in the box' again).

The BBC Studios will certainly find life tough. While it is expected to have a turnover at launch of about £400m a year, it may well be set on a declining trajectory. Its long-running, high volume shows are now to be open to all-comers: so we could see indies bidding to produce the 'banker' programmes, like *East Enders* and *Watchdog*. In theory, BBC Studios will have the compensation of being free to bid for non-BBC work, but I am not convinced that the potential for other UK broadcasters to commission BBC produced shows is that great. For radio production, negligible, one would say, and even with TV, why would, for example, Channel 5 commission from BBC Studios rather than say a producer from within its own Viacom stable?

Maybe the BBC might find the international market offers more scope, but changing their focus to developing global formats is not necessarily the best option for the British audience. Then there's the challenge of retaining the best creative talent within a context where any

reward package deemed too high for the BBC may get splashed across the front page of the *Daily Mail*. Maybe all the above is why the Studios lost some of their top executives before it had even fully launched.

Well, this particular die is cast, and all friends of the BBC will wish it well. But can we now take some time to review whether downsizing the BBC, talk of privatising Channel Four, and seeing the fruits of our hugely successful independent production industry become increasingly part of the profits of global media corporations is where we really want to go?

If we still value the concept of public good in the media context, and public purposes such as the portrayal of British culture in all its diversity, and the promotion of good citizenship in our frailer-than-we-thought democracy, then there must surely be strong and well-resourced media companies in the UK with those objectives at their heart. How about the BBC and Channel 4 in our national glass showcase rather than in a box?

Fight for the right to *Strictly*!

Mike Flood Page

The BBC should defend to the death its right to entertain. It should not allow politicians to mess with its programme decisions or meddle with the schedule. Hands off *Strictly*; let us hear *The Voice*! The BBC should remind the Government that its public service remit is to inform, educate and entertain. That's right: entertain. Entertainment has been integral to the BBC's success since the very beginning. The first Director-General John Reith knew this very well, scheduling an ample supply of variety acts on the Light Programme to balance the more austere diet of highbrow fare on the Home Service.

But surely BBC entertainment gems like *Strictly Come Dancing* are safe with this Government? Indeed during Charter negotiations former Culture Secretary John Whittingdale, who had the future of the BBC in his hands, went on the record only the other day to say he admires the risk the BBC took in commissioning *Strictly*. However, this represented a change of tune. The year before he told the *Guardian*'s Charlotte Higgins that in some areas the BBC is: "way outside the definition of what I call public-service broadcasting", citing programmes such as *The Voice* which he felt copied a format already provided by the market.¹⁵⁰ He said it was debatable whether there was a public-service argument for *Strictly*, and saw no case for transmitting it at the same time as ITV's *X Factor*, accusing the BBC of chasing ratings. But ITV, which has also objected to the BBC's scheduling of *Strictly*, would be upset if *The Voice* was scrapped: they recently spent North of £355 million acquiring the company that make it.

The BBC has always had to walk a tight-rope between ensuring it carries enough popular programming to retain wide support from the general public, whilst at the same time being seen to deliver on its public service aims. It risks being damned if it do, and damned if it don't. If it becomes too popular critics and competitors accuse it of dumbing down and betraying its commitment to quality programming. They ask why it should enjoy the benefit of a licence fee. On the other hand, if it follows a strategy based upon compensating for market failure by emphasising its contribution to education, the arts and news and current affairs then it runs the risk of being accused of elitism, or worse, irrelevance. Audiences begin to ask why they are paying a licence fee for programmes and services they do not use. In the words of Hugh Wheldon a former Managing Director of BBC Television, its unenviable task, is "to make the good popular, and the popular good."

So if it is to survive intact the BBC has no choice: it must fight for the right to *Strictly*.

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The blind protectors of the BBC are hastening its demise

David Elstein

As is so often the case, we fail to see the wood for the trees. Too many of those who profess to be committed to public service broadcasting mistake the institutions we rely on for its delivery for PSB itself. Sadly, however often the under-performance by those institutions is made apparent, we cling to the fading promise rather than analyse the root weaknesses.

The most obvious evidence of this blinkered conservatism lies in much of the response to the White Paper on the future of the BBC, and the debate over possible privatisation of Channel 4. *Any* imagined change to the status quo for the BBC or Channel 4 is greeted with near-hysteria. Meanwhile, every three years, Ofcom reports on the state of PSB, and deafening silence greets its steady charting of the downward slope of delivery.

The paradox is that the supposed guardians of PSB – the BBC, Channel 4 and Ofcom (and to a much lesser extent ITV and Five) – are the guilty parties. The main criterion against which Ofcom measures PSB performance is the volume of UK originations, by value. What its reports demonstrate is a steady downward trajectory, such that the BBC and the commercial PSBs (ITV, Channel 4 and 5) each generates just £1 billion's worth of UK origination, outside sport: a 15% decline in real terms since 2008. In ten years, over £500 million's worth of origination has evaporated across the system.

The detail is even more alarming. There has been a wholesale abandonment of key public service genres: arts, education, children's, current affairs, religion and nations and regions. Other than in children's, where the BBC is the solitary provider, the falls have taken place across the commercial divide: this is not a function (certainly, not a sole function) of greater competition for advertising revenue. The BBC has also shifted resources, away from core PSB, and towards general output and infrastructure projects.

Across the system, spending on arts and classical music has declined 32% since 1998; while, according to Ofcom, "provision has all but ceased of religion and ethics (down 58% since 1998) and formal education (down 77% since 1998)".

At one level, this is not entirely surprising. When the Broadcasting Policy Group (BPG) – which I chair – published its report on the future of the BBC in 2004 ("Beyond The Charter"), we had a clear view of the perverse incentives that were undermining PSB delivery. The

BBC, we said, was strongly motivated to preserve the television licence fee by offering a wide range of popular programming, so that the universal obligation to pay the licence fee was matched by provision to all types of viewers.

What might have been seen as an opportunity to deliver large amounts of the content that the market failed to supply – the core PSB genres – had become subsumed by the primary objective. Of course, a good deal of high quality programming continues to this day to be financed by the licence fee: but the steady reduction in that supply – that we had already identified in 2004 – also continues to this day.

Meanwhile, ITV's ability to provide public service content – which it had done to increasingly powerful effect through the 1970s and 1980s – was thoroughly undermined by the auctioning of licences imposed by the 1990 Broadcasting Act, and the process of consolidation within ITV, first tolerated by the regulator, and then encouraged by it, which the auction effectively required.

The disappearance of much of ITV's old PSB obligations – such as children's programmes, education, arts, current affairs and documentaries – has been accompanied by a steady downgrading of whatever remained. In the 1990s, ITV broadcast six hours a week of commissioned drama. These days, it averages two hours a week. The ITV news audience has collapsed as a result of the main bulletin being shunted around the schedule for many years.

As for regional news and current affairs – which used to be the bedrock of the old federal ITV structure – Ofcom (the media regulator created in 2003) has allowed a substantial reduction in ITV's provision. The biggest cut came in the wake of the 2008 advertising downturn: but Ofcom, in reluctantly bowing to temporary pressure, was too dozy to require a restoration of the cuts once ITV returned to its prior profitability. ITV now makes profits in excess of £800 million annually: the programming cuts have never been restored.

Ofcom's weakness, the relaxation of specific PSB requirements allowed by the 2003 Communications Act, and ITV plc's understandable drive for profits have had a paradoxical side effect. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the pre-1990 success of strong regulation of commercial ITV licensees, the notion of private ownership has itself become discredited.

The near unanimous opposition to privatisation of Channel 4 sometimes takes on an *Alice in Wonderland* dimension. On a platform with the outstanding director, Peter Kosminsky, recently, I heard him describe the consolidation of ITV in the 1990s (a foolish weakening of

control by the regulator of the day) as “privatisation”: as if the ITV companies of the previous three decades (whose output he warmly praised) had not been privately-owned profit-seekers! He simply did not understand the difference between strong regulation and weak regulation.

For six years, I was responsible for the ITV weekday schedule. The rules laid down by the regulator were tough and strictly enforced: ITV delivered a service with PSB embedded at its heart, regularly out-performing the BBC in core PSB output. Arguably, the operational efficiencies required by private ownership – which contrasted with the over-staffed bureaucracies in the public sector – contributed to this outcome.

The presumption expressed by many independent producers – that private ownership of Channel 4 would be bound to result in worse output and budget cuts – is especially puzzling. They are all privately owned. Is corner-cutting, quality-reduction and budget-slashing really how they run their businesses and boost their profits? Have all the US broadcasters that commission drama and comedy shows that put the UK to shame prospered by chopping budgets? Has HBO ever reduced its programme spend? Did it throw away the pilot for *Game of Thrones* and start again because it was trying to save money to fund dividends?

When the BPG was writing its 2004 report, the impact of the 2003 Act on Channel 4 had barely begun to take effect. We looked at the most recent Channel 4 reports, and noted that its remit of hard quotas included 330 hours a year of schools programmes, 7 hours a week of adult education, 3 hours a week of multi-cultural content, an hour a week of religion, 4 hours a week of current affairs, 4 hours a week of peak-time news, 70% of all output (80% in peak) to be UK origination, 60% of all output (80% in peak) to be first run, and minimum proportions of output to be sourced outside the M25 and from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Like other UK broadcasters, it was obliged to ensure 50% of output was of EU origin, 25% came from independent producers, and 10% from EU independents, as well as providing subtitling and signing to help the hard of hearing. Unique to Channel 4 was the duty to assign 0.5% of revenue to training and development.

In practice, the channel consistently out-performed nearly all these quota requirements. Unsurprisingly, the BPG saw no need to consider privatising Channel 4 in 2004.

Today, nearly all those obligations have been abandoned, to be replaced by verbal promises. Multi-cultural has been subsumed into “diversity”. Farrukh Dhondy, once

responsible for multi-cultural output, concedes in the recently published book of essays on Channel 4 (*What Price Channel 4?*) that such content might need re-defining – “but please not DIVERSITY!” Arts programmes – never part of a formal quota, but long a mainstay of Channel 4 schedules – have virtually disappeared.

In my own chapter in the Channel 4 book – originally published by openDemocracy on March 1st – I had tried to make sense of Channel 4’s claim, in its 2014 Annual Report, to have broadcast over 2,500 hours of education, for a spend of just £6 million. I put it down to a Freudian misprint. The 2015 Annual Report contained two new footnotes, designed to clarify the claim. The £6 million (now £5 million) was the budget for formal educational material for 14-19-year-olds – adult education, once the jewel in the Channel 4 crown, has been entirely discarded. The 2,622 hours (now 2,757) was the total of all programmes “that are educational in nature”.

That’s 55 hours of “educational” content per week: none of it specified or listed. Meanwhile, the last fragments of actual education are left in the hands of the Head of Formats, who tells us how proud he is to have reached 1.4 million 14-19-year-olds with content that is “not overbearingly ‘educational’”. Today, 60% of the Channel 4 schedule is repeats (against an upper limit of 40% 15 years ago): which at least is better than E4, which is 90% repeats and (in breach of EU rules) 65% US acquisitions.

Of course, the BBC is little better. According to the Green Paper, just 0.01% of BBC television output is education, and 0.001% of radio output: so much for “inform, educate and entertain”. The cries of anguish that greeted the appointment of supposed hard-liner John Whittingdale to take charge of BBC Charter review were scarcely muted when his anodyne Green Paper was published. Days before the even more anodyne White Paper emerged, Kosminsky was still warning BAFTA celebrants against looming “evisceration”.

What is actually happening? The BBC Trust is being replaced by a unitary board; external regulation will fall to Ofcom; BBC in-house production will be spun off as a separate entity, allowing open commissioning of nearly all BBC content; and a small contestable fund for public service content will be established. All these were recommended by the BPG in 2004 (though we wanted a larger contestable fund). Twelve wasted years.

The BBC has been allowed to keep the licence fee (which we thought should have been progressively replaced by subscription), but there is no guarantee that the fee will survive the technological changes sweeping the industry. It is being asked to be more “distinctive” – just as the BBC Trust repeatedly urged. Some commentators still seem to think that the BBC will

be forced to offer free TV licences to the over-75s after May 2020. That is simply untrue: that “20% cut in BBC resources” will not happen unless the BBC chooses to inflict such a burden on itself.

There is some dispute about who will appoint the four BBC Board members to represent England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (John Whittingdale or BBC chair Rona Fairhead – as if it makes any difference). That some members of the House of Lords see this as an existential threat to the BBC is simply bonkers.

So Charter review comes and goes; and PSB continues its steady decline. The issue of that decline has been neither addressed nor analysed. The need for a large, dedicated public service content fund, to be allocated contestably, was urgent in 2004 (and in 2005, when the advisory committee chaired by Lord Burns reached the same conclusion). It is even more urgent now.

The self-styled defenders of PSB actually contribute to its decline by investing their political clout in defending the institutions that are at the root of the problem, and opposing the obvious solution. It has been a process that is neither edifying nor enlightening. We seem never to learn.

Sharing the licence fee could re-invigorate the BBC

Aaron Bastani



The government has proposed the creation of a new ‘Public Service Content Fund’, drawn from the BBC’s underspend in previous years. This fund will be contestable: a big innovation. It will consist of £20 million a year for a two-three year trial period starting in 2018. It looks set to resource TV and online content which focuses on under-served genres, as identified by Ofcom, and under-served audiences, such as BME groups.

The licence fee could increasingly pay for content produced by independent organisations, which won’t even appear on BBC platforms. We can use this development to start moving public service broadcasting beyond both market and state production.

For now it seems that applications to the fund will be considered by a small panel of appointed industry figures. Not dissimilar, then, to the current set-up with Arts Council England funding. The evaluation criteria will likely include value for money (including likely impact and reach), creative risk-taking and innovation.

Future contestable funding also needs to include news and current affairs. The government’s White Paper proposes “areas such as children’s programming where the BBC has a near-monopoly and where contestability might deliver new, fresh content”. Yet it is in news and current affairs, more than almost anywhere else, that the BBC enjoys excessive market share, with 70% of the TV news market and 75% when it comes to radio news. That is unhealthy for public debate.

With news and current affairs included, the Public Service Content Fund could be the beginning of a different kind of BBC. What is more the sums involved, should the pilots show value and quality, should be much higher. I’ve previously proposed that a third of the BBC News budget, approximately £120 million, should be awarded in this manner. This could strengthen civil society, support local news, and lead to a renaissance of independent investigative journalism.

Contestable funding should not be viewed as undermining the BBC’s commitment to public service broadcasting, but rather a confirmation of it. It would be rethinking public service media in the Twenty-First Century. It would make some cracking telly as well.

Do my biscuits pass your public value test?

Lis Howell

I used to have this gorgeous recipe for parmesan biscuits. My friend who is a brilliant cook gave me a print-out of a recipe from the BBC website. Last time I tried making them I had a head like a sieve and also had a sieve full of flour, and no idea how much cheese and butter to add. I couldn't find the printed recipe, so I wiped my hands and googled parmesan and BBC to check – but instead I got another recipe, for Parmesan Crisps. That's odd, I thought - they've changed the website design. But then I realised – this wasn't the BBC Food website from my print-out, which was now probably somewhere in the recycling bin! No, this was the BBC Good Food website, a similar but commercial website produced by BBC Worldwide and showing ads for Dove and Philadelphia. By then I was past baking so I opened a packet of crackers instead, and sat down and thought about the BBC website, and what one of my media friends called the recipe fiasco.

'Recipe-gate' happened in May 2016. I think it was caused by the BBC's knee jerk response to the government's White Paper in advance of the BBC's Charter renewal. The White Paper calls for the BBC to be a 'broadcaster of distinction'. More particularly, on page 36 it looks at the BBC Online, and says "some stakeholders have raised concerns that the BBC provides "soft news" and "magazine" style content" online" The BBC's instant response was to announce it was removing all its free recipes, presumably because of the White Paper assertion that the BBC should not "replicate(s) what is provided elsewhere and which contributes little to its public service mission."

So what exactly is replicated elsewhere? Well, parmesan biscuit recipes for a start. There are dozens out there (I'm trying one with rosemary in future by the way). Why does the BBC need to give me a free parmesan biscuit recipe, when there are hundreds of people trying to make a living doing the same thing? But there was public outrage when the recipes were threatened. Nearly 200,000 people signed a petition. The reaction led to an appearance on Radio 4's *The Media Show* where BBC Head of News James Harding announced that all the recipes would remain but would be now on the BBC's commercial arm, BBC Good Food, which distributes content for profit. Harding was then asked by Steve Hewlett the presenter if it wasn't even worse for the BBC's commercial competitors if the commercial arm of the BBC now had all these lovely recipes, presumably without paying for them as part of its commercial content?

By this time the mix was getting more complex than Nigella's turkey stuffing. Wouldn't it have made more sense the other way around – for all the BBC recipes to be taken off the commercial BBC Good Food and put on BBC Food? Surely it's within their public service remit to publish recipes that don't promote brands? There is deep, deep confusion about what the BBC should do with web content, and this is exacerbated by the relationship with BBC Worldwide.

The White Paper mentions more than once “concerns that the BBC has not always been as sensitive to its impact on third parties (in this case cookery websites) as it needs to be”. It's understood that the public service BBC, funded by a licence fee, should not deprive businesses of their markets. This responsibility is currently undertaken by the BBC Trust which applies a ‘public value test’ to new developments. But it's not clear if BBC Worldwide is outside that remit because it is commercial. So the easy way of dealing with content that isn't clearly public service – for example recipes – is to siphon it over to BBC Worldwide.

This is short-term thinking. In previous decades, BBC Worldwide material for sale could be separated out quite easily from other content. Roughly speaking it was either in box sets or in overseas markets. Now the web means that material meant for overseas sales can be accessed easily in the UK and the rights issues are muddled. Take BBC Earth for example: an amazing geography magazine now free on line in the UK. What does that do to other amazing geography magazines, not funded by a licence fee? So we're back in recipe-gate again. And from the public's point of view, a person googling tigers or parmesan biscuits doesn't recognise that they are getting the commercial arm of the BBC. I'm not saying we shouldn't trust BBC Worldwide of course, but it's not the BBC as we know and fund it.

The White Paper came out on Thursday May 12th 2016. Four days later, the BBC published the Online Creative Review. They said they would close or re-deploy several web services. ‘Iwonder’ - the information service - would close. BBC Food (ouch) would close, but BBC Worldwide's Good Food site will remain. The BBC would “focus on distinctive long-form journalism online under a Current Affairs banner” and close the online News Magazine. They would integrate Newsbeat output into BBC News Online, but close the separate Newsbeat site and app. They would close the Travel site and halt development of the Travel app. And they would stop running local news index web pages.

The principle behind these changes seemed to be, to stop providing anything paid for by licence fee payers which could not be justified as distinctive. But what does this ubiquitous word ‘distinctive’ mean? My parmesan cookies were certainly distinctive (particularly the time

I forgot to put parmesan in) but is distinctiveness really a clear criterion for judging what should and shouldn't be paid for by the public?

And there's a further issue just starting to raise its head. It seems what people now want are apps rather than a website ("one click instead of ten" as a user said to me). Is there really any issue with the BBC providing free apps? Why are Newsbeat and Travel being axed? Is it to save money? £15 million is the estimated savings of the total changes to Online. But isn't this the one area where development and innovation is necessary? It all seems a bit rushed and cosmetic. After all, when the White Paper suggests BBC Online is too big, the BBC responds within a week! And one result is that at least two apps – possibly now more the future than websites – are unceremoniously ditched. But not all apps are to go. It's apparently okay for CBeebies to have an app, presumably because there is only one CBeebies – but hang on, what about all the other children's content providers?

It's been suggested that part of the problem is that there is no committed enthusiastic champion for the BBC Online at the top, on the BBC Executive Board. About five years ago the BBC website's budget was slashed by about 25 per cent. Apparently it was generally felt in the Corporation that BBC Online should stick to promoting TV programmes or disseminating news. That is also the tone of the 2016 White Paper. But, just as the licence fee itself absolutely must be modernised and cannot possibly stand the test of time, the website/online/apps issue can only get bigger and more confused. This stuff is all around us every day and becoming much more integrated with broadcasting.

It would be perfectly respectable for the BBC Executive Board to respond to the White Paper more robustly by saying - yes, ALL our Online offering is totally distinctive and a vital part of us. So we are going to fight for the right to put our recipes online because our recipes are very different from the commercial offering. For example, BBC Food wouldn't have branded ingredients or adverts or suggest you dump this cooking lark and go out to Parmesan Shack Inc.

Perhaps to ensure real distinctiveness the BBC could do more self-censoring. Taking BBC Food as an example, they could perhaps ensure that too many similar recipes don't proliferate, or that only healthy recipes are used. But to do this would require a clear mission statement, and a purpose. It would require a brave champion who can see into the future and recognise that web content IS broadcasting content - they are never going to be distinguishable again. It would mean a clear, direct, and robust strategy for BBC Online. Right now there doesn't seem to be one. In fact, sadly, I think there is as much chance of

finding that as of me finding my recipe in the recycling bin!

5: Open up, the future is coming!

Throughout this book the contributors have tried to engage with the BBC we will need in the coming decade. It is clear that the British public, however it is defined, will only place more demands on the Corporation and that these demands ought to provoke serious reflection on how it engages with the public it purports to serve, and how best it can discover and share the truth. This last chapter looks more directly at the possibilities created by technological innovation, for a more responsive institution and for de-centralisation of the creative process.

By showing how BBC journalists works with citizen journalists to cover the Syrian war, Lisette Johnston gives a glimpse of how the Corporation looks increasingly likely to rely on a growing number of 'producers'. We are living in a globalised world, yet with information 'black spots' and the rise of nationalist populist forces, along with the echo chambers of the internet, that work against the creation of globally-informed citizenries. Bill Emmott calls on the BBC to update its motto 'Nation shall speak peace unto nation' for the *Vice* generation, while its Head of Religion and Ethics Aaqil Ahmed tells why religious coverage, far from a Cinderella genre, will only increase in importance.

Our lives are increasingly mediated by the digital public sphere, and we cannot leave this for commercial interests alone to shape. Becky Hogge calls on the BBC to intervene as a matter of urgency, firstly by reclaiming and privileging its sixth key purpose, which protects its online services and experimentation. This requires bravery. Cory Doctorow says open up the archives, while James Bennett imagines what a public service algorithm might look like.

Opening up means letting go, and helping to release creativity. Peter Jukes attacks the crony corporatism of Auntie Beeb's commissioning system, and suggests how greater pluralism and freedoms could be achieved. What is really at stake here is the issue of trust, and Dr Mark Lee Hunter suggests that the BBC might in fact gain credibility by loosening its reigns and embracing alliances and partnerships with stakeholder groups.

Finally, Nick Fraser ends the book by bringing many of its concerns and arguments full circle. How can the BBC adapt to a contemporary information-scape flooded with competing narratives and half-truths, while retaining its old value of objectivity? How can the "democratic, egalitarian poetry of self-enlightenment", in Fraser's words, be transformed for a public that justifiably rejects the paternalistic impulse that once sought to guide this ideal

The Brexit referendum result has gone some way to expose how fleetingly these urgent questions have been dealt with thus far in the Charter review process. The commitment to digital innovation was dropped without much fuss. It is not too late to intervene in the review. The BBC as arguably the most important cultural institution in Britain must show us what it is to be a public service in the 21st century. If not, the argument - however the next 11-year charter pans out - is already lost. Open up, the future is coming!

How is citizen journalism transforming the BBC?

Lisette Johnston

We are living in a digital world. The BBC, as the world's biggest broadcaster, has had to adapt to that world, particularly across social and mobile platforms. That evolution looks set to continue as the ways audiences consume news changes, and breaking news is one of the best examples of this. During November 2015's Paris attacks, 80% of those accessing the BBC News' updates and livestreams from the website were doing so via mobile.

There has been an increase in what Stuart Hughes calls 'social media newsgathering', with journalists scouring sites such as Facebook and Twitter for content, commentary and contributors, and this has been well documented, particularly in crisis situations. This work has been evident on our TV screens with coverage of the Paris attacks, the April 2016 bombing at Brussels Airport and the July 2016 terrorist attacks on Istanbul's Ataturk Airport which killed 42 people. One of the deadliest attacks in Baghdad since the Iraq war happened in July 2016, when up to 300 people were killed. This too involved news outlets using a large amount of eyewitness content. And more recently, protests following a spate of shootings in the US in July highlighted the value for journalists in using content found online. Footage captured by Lavish Reynolds after her partner Philando Castile was shot by a police officer is a prime example of a new source of potential content as the aftermath of the shooting was captured on Facebook Live.

What has been examined less frequently is how these digital relationships work, and how BBC journalists are engaging with people creating content found and distributed online, which is something I have researched, with a particular focus on Syria.

While working as a senior producer for BBC World News TV in 2012, I was awarded a PhD scholarship from City University to study how user-generated content (UGC) has been used by the channel to cover the conflict in Syria, and also look at how journalistic practices have changed to incorporate UGC and activist voices into coverage. This remains key in the Syria conflict five years on, but the findings are also important and relevant for other news events from which it is challenging to report, either due to logistics or safety.

While Lyse Doucet, Paul Wood, Ian Pannell and Quentin Sommerville, among others, have provided amazing journalism from inside Syria they cannot be everywhere at once. My research found that limited access to the country has led to greater interaction with citizens and activists whose voices were marginalised at the start of the conflict in 2011. Media

activists are now perceived to be akin to 'correspondents' by some news outlets, and news organisations' relationships with them are evolving.

The current Syria conflict began in March 2011 and for the first six months foreign journalists were unable to enter the country. Since then, correspondents from the BBC and other organisations have sporadically been able to enter, yet the risks in doing so are high. The death of *Sunday Times* correspondent Marie Colvin in Baba Amr in February 2012, and the beheading of US freelancer James Foley in October 2014, highlight how dangerous a Syria assignment can be. And it is getting more risky not less, with continued bombings, the rise of Islamic State and foreign airstrikes.

While journalists do still report across parts of the country, UGC is a vital storytelling tool, particularly where there are no journalistic 'boots on the ground'. It could be footage of the aftermath of barrel bombing in Homs, or of the airstrikes in Idlib, which was distributed by media activists at the end of last year. These individuals are no longer just citizens but have become 'producers' – both users and producers, and identifying what can, or should, be used from these sources, is a skill journalists have had to learn. All of those interviewed for the research said they had experienced a steep learning curve in developing new practices and measures to ensure non-BBC content could go to air. These ranged from becoming proficient at 'verification' processes using a variety of technologies and developing relationships with those providing the content.

BBC journalists were frequently in contact with groups such as the Local Co-ordinating Committees (LCCs) across Syria, and Shaam News Network. Many meetings began on Skype, or with BBC journalists tracing the owners of YouTube accounts who had uploaded content, in some cases via interaction on Facebook. Footage these groups filmed would be triangulated with reports from agencies and other source. Other relationships developed after BBC Arabic staff contacted people they trusted inside Syria, such as doctors in Aleppo. Conversations would snowball, resulting in journalists speaking with other 'trusted' individuals. In other situations, members of Syrian diaspora in the UK helped locate individual activists via phone, e-mail and social media.

Staff also found that activist groups became more organised by cataloguing content posted on social media. For example, the LCCs provide both English and Arabic descriptions of the videos uploaded on their Facebook page, and their content has frequently been proved to be accurate. This means, certain groups' footage, contributors and intelligence have been used more regularly by the BBC. BBC staff said they did try to engage with Syrians from across different groups, and there was an active effort to get pro-Assad voices on air to try to balance coverage, particularly at the start of what has become a complex and fractured

conflict. However, as time went on, civilians and government officials were either harder to research or unwilling to speak. Interviews with them, while welcome, are rare. Therefore activists, keen to engage, became regular voices, and relationships between them and BBC producers further developed.

Journalists are nonetheless conscious that some of those sharing content are doing so along political lines, and may exaggerate reports of deaths or violence in a bid to highlight their cause. This raises questions of balance, and it is for the BBC journalist, using their learned skills, to try to make sense of it all. The high-profile hoaxes of the Syrian Hero Boy video, which turned out to be the work of a Scandinavian filmmaker, and the 'Gay Girl in Damascus' case, where a US-Syrian lesbian blogger was in fact an American man writing from Edinburgh University, highlight the challenges facing journalists reporting events in the region.

Despite this, as the dangers inside Syria have grown, at times, so has the reliance on eyewitnesses. Amid fears about security of communication, journalists talked about a 'duty of care' to contributors, which might be another reason at times the voices on air have been predominantly activists. A ban on routinely calling satellite phones was imposed at the UGC Hub, the department which verifies eyewitness content, due to safety concerns. Skype is now the preferred medium for contacting people inside Syria. Producers use anonymous Gmail and Skype accounts which do not mention the BBC in a bid to ensure anonymous contributors will not be linked to the organisation.

The media landscape has undoubtedly become more collaborative and interactive, and audience participation at all levels is now a consideration for journalists who harvest content from websites, tweet the audience directly and encourage contributions to their programmes. While one cannot generalise, it seems the relationship between BBC journalists and people within Syria has changed throughout the course of the conflict with journalists in many ways acting more like a facilitators of news coming out of a journalistic black hole. With the rise of the Islamic State, and more 'producers' than ever before, it looks likely that the BBC will have to continue developing these practices both in Syria, Iraq and beyond wherever terrorist attacks take place.

Dr Lisette Johnston is an assistant editor with BBC World News TV, heading up the planning division for the international channel based in London. She completed her PhD in 2015, and has worked in journalism for 14 years, the last six with BBC News as a reporter, producer and editor. She likes cheese and tweets @lisettejohnston

Revitalise the foreign language services

Constanze Stelzenmüller



What I want and value from the BBC is news and current affairs—the best there can be, with a network of correspondents spanning the world. UK politicians and policymakers ought to realize that the Beeb and its stellar reputation are a huge asset in Great Britain's soft power globally. So if I had my druthers, the Beeb would be bringing back the foreign language services in full force. Never have they been more needed than today.

Constanze Stelzenmüller is a senior fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution.

Be the world's broadcasting station

Bill Emmott



We all know that the BBC has good overseas coverage, and it is hard to find anyone who thinks the World Service is anything other than both broadcasting and freedom-of-information gold. As a true public service in the age of globalisation, however, the BBC should now aspire to be something more: to be truly the world's broadcaster, bringing the world to British audiences, bringing Britain to world audiences, but above all being the unmatched reporter and analyst on world affairs—political, economic, social, scientific, cultural—for audiences all over the globe.

What this means is more than just providing good reports from Gaza, Ukraine or Syria to the *Ten O'Clock News*, more than just fitting in the odd star-presenter-takes-a-train-around-India series or documentary.

It means showing people truths they don't know they want, explaining puzzles they didn't know existed, exposing unreported conflicts. It means connecting the dots across countries in the way in which they deal with contemporary problems such as ageing societies, climate change, education, migration, technology and all the rest. It means taking a global approach to journalism, which is what the BBC is about, rather than a Britain-Plus approach.

It means taking a pass on ratings and instead broadcasting a film on the rise of the National Front in France, or the corruption crisis in Brazil, or the environmental crisis in China, and not hiding it away late at night on BBC Four. It could mean taking some of the best programmes on BBC World, such as the *Dateline* debates among London-based foreign correspondents, and showing them on a domestic BBC channel too.

It means playing to the BBC's greatest journalistic strength, and to the strength of its brand worldwide. It would appeal to the *Vice* generation if presented unstuffily. And it would offer a genuine 21st century version of the BBC motto: Nation shall speak peace unto nation.

Bill Emmott is an independent writer, lecturer and consultant on international affairs, based in Oxford and Somerset. His most recent book is *Good Italy, Bad Italy*.

From the frontlines of the fight against religious illiteracy

Aaqil Ahmed

There was a time when religion was everywhere in the media, when broadcasters had Heads of Religion and newspapers religious correspondents a plenty. Now I'm a weird anomaly, a Head of Religion in a time when everyone else has turned their backs on a subject defined by many as a Cinderella genre.

Typical BBC doing something out of step and time with the rest of the media landscape. Well yes and no. Yes, typical BBC to understand something is important and no, this is no luxury position but one that is more relevant than ever.

We live in a time and in a continent often referred to as 'post-Christian Europe', a period and place where religion is a spent force and irrelevant. Well... not quite. Europe may seemingly have moved on from traditional religion but the rest of the world hasn't and right now across Britain and Europe people from across the world are living amongst us to whom religion is still important.

In Britain we have over 800,000 Hindus and 5% of the population is Muslim. It's not even that though. Whilst traditional Christianity may be in decline Catholicism and Pentecostal Christianity are growing due to immigration. This pattern, taken alongside low birth rates amongst traditional European communities, suggests that the percentage of people with faith is going to grow. By 2050 it's suggested that 40% of Britain's population will have some form of ethnic minority or migrant background.

Throw into this demographic shift the issues we see around us, from Daesh to freedom of speech, to religious intolerance and extremism: why would anyone think religion isn't a genre we need to get right?

Not a luxury

Almost a century of 'post-Christian Europe' and decades of drift into secularism have created a society with poor religious literacy. Whilst this may not have mattered in the past it certainly does now.

Across all groups in society very few people know about each other's beliefs, values and customs. Into this vacuum it's possible to say anything and for prejudice to kick in. Given what a lack of religious literacy in a time of demographic change could mean, it is vital that we get this subject right today and plan for the future.

Changes to Songs of Praise have made it a multidenominational weekly, reflecting the changes within

Christianity in the UK. This was seen recently in its visit to the notorious migrant camp 'The Jungle' in Calais.¹⁵¹ Religious literacy is so poor that many didn't understand why *Songs of Praise* would be there, but compassion for the vulnerable is at the core of Christianity.

Documentaries such as *The Life of Muhammad*, *The Kumbh Mela*, *The Story of the Jews*, *Sacred Wonders of Britain* and *How God Made the English* tell us much about the beliefs of the many tribes of modern Britain.

Part of the BBC's strategy in this area for the past few years has been to create a back-catalogue of programming that will enable us to take the viewer and listener on a journey to understand the beliefs of their fellow citizens at whatever level they want. We could only have done this before with Christianity, but now through films such as *The Story of Diwali*, *The Passover Meal*, *Britain's Muslim Soldiers*, *Chinese New Year* and *The Turban* to name a few, that is changing.

The strategy on religion is to mark key calendar moments across religions; explore, examine and question faith and the actions of believers and to address that lack of religious literacy in society. It's a privilege to have such a strategy in place at the BBC, particularly when many media outlets seem to be ignoring or downgrading religious subjects. It's not, however, a luxury and as silly as this may sound today to some, understanding religion will become more important in the future. It is, in some senses, a more essential genre than others.

Holding its nerve

I came to religion and ethics from current affairs to help make sense of the world post 9/11. Since then we have seen religion and people who claim to be religious impact on our lives in many ways, from additional security, terrorism, war and attacks on freedom of speech.

But that's not the only story. From delivering aid to refugees, to chaplains on children's hospital wards through to meditation in prisons and schools - religion and belief also enriches the lives of many. It's a source of joy and comfort for believers and touches the lives of many with faith and those with none.

Religion is not dead and despite decades where for many it became irrelevant it's now firmly back in the public space. The BBC is the last game in town in this area and we should all appreciate it holding its nerve where rivals have walked away.

The business and social cohesion case is in front of us all. Now though it's all about ensuring that a future where religiosity grows is met by a modern media outlet that can help answer what will become a defining issue of our lives: living with religion in a culturally diverse society with poor levels of religious literacy, in a world defined by religion and conflict.

Aaqil Ahmed is Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC.

Open up the archives!

Cory Doctorow



The BBC should open its archive of treasures from history, bought with license-payers' money over decades, making them available for free watching and remixing, creating a new generation of British digital creators — contrast this with commissioning policies that result in everything being locked up after one or two viewings, in order to optimise the Beeb to sell video-on-demand services to Americans.

The Beeb could lead the world's public service broadcasters here, forming a grand coalition through which every civilised nation (that is, every nation with a publicly funded broadcaster) makes its archive available to all the others on remixable, shareable terms, creating an almost unimaginably huge pool of public video, audio, stills, and games that are available throughout the world.

Further, countries that are “less developed” and “least developed” in the UN's rankings could use these archives to bootstrap their own media creations, giving raw materials to creators from all walks of life in a grand public conversation, with public assets, in public spaces.

Cory Doctorow (craphound.com) is a science fiction author, activist, journalist and blogger — the co-editor of Boing Boing (boingboing.net) and the author of many books, most recently *In Real Life*, a graphic novel; *Information Doesn't Want to be Free*, a book about earning a living in the Internet age, and *Homeland*, the award-winning, best-selling sequel to the 2008 YA novel *Little Brother*.

The answer to 'Breaking Bad blues' is autonomy

Peter Jukes

During the phone hacking scandal that erupted in the summer of 2011, prompting Rupert and James Murdoch to close the *News of the World* and abandon their bid for the remaining shares of BSkyB, it rapidly became apparent that the political ramifications were more to do with over-concentrated ownership than press regulation. Owning then nearly 40% of the press, and on the verge of taking over Britain's biggest broadcaster in terms of revenues, Rupert Murdoch was more powerful in media terms than Berlusconi (and the Italian media mogul is at least a citizen of the country he dominates). It was a glaring example of market failure and what Adam Smith calls the 'special problem' of monopoly.

Yet, whenever I point this problem out to defenders of News Corp, such as [Paul Staines at the Guido Fawkes blog](#)¹⁵², they come back with the same quick rejoinder: "the BBC is a monopoly too! And one you are forced to pay for..."

Many defenders of the BBC are stymied by this *Tu Quoque* argument. The BBC certainly isn't a commercial monopoly, and is rapidly being outstripped by other global players. But there is an element of truth in this accusation. One reason I felt confident to cover the hacking scandal and aftermath (*The Fall of the House of Murdoch*, Unbound, 2012; *Beyond Contempt*, Canbury Press, 2014) is because whenever anyone reiterated "what about the BBC?" I could prove that I had already inveighed - at some cost to my job as a TV dramatist - against the monopolistic stranglehold that the BBC held over drama.

In what must be considered one of the longest career suicide notes in history, my 2009 piece for Prospect Magazine¹⁵³, *Why Britain Can't Do The Wire*, went viral and was reported in the *Guardian*¹⁵⁴. The thesis was simple: the relative standards of UK TV drama had dropped catastrophically compared to the US. This wasn't for lack of talent as the number of British actors, writers and directors in US drama proved (and still proves). Something was rotten in the state of domestic TV, and I argued it began with the market leaders, the BBC, who had instituted the most top down and centralised commissioning system possible, predicated on one or two people deciding most of the nation's dramatic output. This, rather than a shortage of supply or demand, led to the disempowerment of writers and creators, and Britain losing its former role as an enviable centre of dramatic and directorial innovation.

Breaking Bad Blues

Six years on, little has changed. ITV, bouncing back after a dip in advertising revenues, has returned to form. But most writers, actors, production designers and directors would agree: the technical advances in filming and storytelling in the US are leaving us far behind. Though the American media market is five times ours, that's been true since TV was invented. It doesn't explain why, starting with HBO 20 years ago, US drama has gone from strength to strength in both popular appeal and a race to the top in terms of content.

Does it matter? Compared to news or documentaries or big cultural events like the Olympics, is drama such an important part of the BBC brand that it deserves reform?

It certainly matters to powerful political figures such as Boris Johnson, now foreign secretary.. At a Charles Wheeler award ceremony last year, which was followed by an interview with Alan Yentob, Johnson's main comment to the long serving BBC arts exec was "Breaking Bad is bloody brilliant." He demanded to know why the BBC couldn't make something as narratively entertaining and psychologically gripping as the AMC series which depicted a chemistry school teacher, Walter White, becoming New Mexico's top crystal meth manufacturer.¹⁵⁵

Yentob didn't have a compelling answer, other than to say again how big the US market is, and then talk about opening the BBC archive of shows to the license fee paying public.

That familiar first answer – we can never match the US in size and therefore quality – doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Some of the most influential dramas in the last five years have come from Sweden and Denmark, who have viewing audiences as relatively small to ours as we are to the US. In the last few years Scandinavian countries and the even smaller Israeli TV industry (who made the originals of *In Treatment* and *Homeland*) have exported more successful drama formats to the US than we have.

But the reference to the archive and the BBC's historic legacy was even more dispiriting. The nostalgia for a lost golden age is echoed in the most often cited examples of exported BBC drama hits – *Sherlock Holmes* and *Dr Who*. But these formats are 100 and 50 years old respectively, hardly innovation. This miasma of cultural regression and retreat is not only visible in the content of so much drama output, dominated by kitchen sink soaps or revived costume dramas (e.g. *Poldark*), it's also visible in the personnel.

In terms of the diversity of crews, producers and cast, British media has gone demonstrably backwards since I wrote my essay for *Prospect*. As Lenny Henry points out¹⁵⁶, 2,000 members of the black and minority ethnic communities have left TV production since 2006,

even though the sector has grown by 4,000. If, as Greg Dyke said a decade ago, the BBC was 'hideously white', the face TV drama presents today has become even more pale and wan, leading to a drain of talent across the Atlantic where black actors can play a variety of non-stereotypical roles, and Asian actors aren't constantly discussing arranged marriages or forced to wear the hijab.

There's an easy solution to this, some say: a market solution. While preserving the BBC as a news and documentary brand, many of its more commercial drama and entertainment offerings could easily be spun off into the private sector, and the success of US drama might suggest the profit motive is the magic wand.

With over 30 possible broadcasters and distributors to pitch to, Los Angeles is a sellers' market for innovative TV concepts, whereas the commissioning system in the UK more closely resembles a royal court, with various projects being made or abandoned depending on which executives' fortune is going up or down. Breaking up the Beeb would lead to *Breaking Bad*.

But privatising the drama output of the BBC would not solve the problem of monopoly: it would aggravate it. Many drama productions are already made by so called 'independents', most of whom have actually been swallowed up by global companies such as Sony, 21st Century Fox and NBC. Since most BBC drama commissioners have spent time in the 'independent' sector, or are destined to leave for higher pay there, the *revolving door* problem – commissioners commissioning themselves when they leave – is one of the key reasons British drama is so lacklustre. Unlike in the US, where the writer is king, drama here is effectively in the control of executives who use it to leverage their careers into the ultimate goal: a million-pound buyout.

(Perversely, the US also has much stronger unions, and the Writers Guild of America [full disclosure I am a member] has the power to close down production and insist on writers' creative control. In contrast the British Writers Guild is a pusillanimous shadow.)

That may seem a cruel analysis of the very talented and committed people still working in TV, and of course there are many exceptional dramas around. But there are not as many as there could be, and the fault lies not in the individuals, but the system.

Taking out the corporatism

At the moment, then, BBC TV drama exemplifies the worst aspects of the mixed economy of

British broadcasting: all the downsides of top heavy centralised bureaucracy, combined with an uncompetitive commercial sector in which the money somehow rarely makes it to the screen in terms of quality.

The corporatist collusion between the private and public service sectors has historically led to the BBC paying ridiculous fees for 'talent' (see Jonathan Ross) and high commercial salaries to senior executives (like former Director General Mark Thomson) on the basis they have to agree the 'going rate'. Yet, with little option of employment except by ITV or another public service broadcaster, Channel 4, there's no way of testing a market rate, and the BBC is victim to all the self-serving downsides of a narrow cartel.

There are precious few slots for producers to pitch to anyway, even with the advent of Netflix and Amazon as potential partners. The demise of drama on the BBC TV Channels 3 and 4 only aggravates the problem of uniformity. Though an increasing number of international sales has led to ostensibly big-budget shows like Sky Atlantic's *Fortitude*, that experiment is hardly ground-breaking in terms of content, borrowing mostly from Scandinavian and US formats. Despite the talents of the writer Simon Donald, British execs don't seem to be able to foster the collaborative 'writers' room' and 'show runner' models which make long running seasons both sustainable and inventive (for an example of the difference, compare the two UK seasons of *House of Cards* with the *three US seasons so far*).

Unless something changes in the way drama is commissioned, selling off BBC drama will be like rail or healthcare privatisation, replacing a public monopoly with some private ones.

Giving the license fee to a range of broadcasters through [some kind of central fund](#)¹⁵⁷ would just add another bureaucratic tier to the process, providing an excuse for commissioner intervention and caution. A BBC Trust that disburses money to worthy production companies would have all the problems of picking winners, with check boxes against diversity perhaps, but no devolution of decision making to the people who matter: the writers, actors and directors.

However, there is one way the BBC can encourage competition, innovation and diversity without going down the routes of privatisation, or becoming another quasi Channel 4: it could force pluralism into the system by creating more producer and writer autonomy, and by removing some of the huge overheads of centralised commissioners.

I first started writing drama in the early nineties when channel controllers, until then just schedulers, were only beginning to intervene in commissioning to shape channels in their

own image. A trusted producer-writer team, like Kenneth Trodd and Dennis Potter, could make *The Singing Detective* with minimal interference. Individual drama departments – series', single play strands, serials, historical dramas – all had their own commissioning budgets. The regions were also independent then, and something rejected by TV centre in London could still turn out to be a hit through BBC Birmingham, Manchester, Wales, Northern Ireland, or Scotland.

None of those structures are really applicable now, given the change in both Britain's social and broadcasting landscape. But pluralism 20 years ago demonstrably led to more variety and ingenuity, and US TV producers looked at our drama output with envy, while they were stuck with *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Yet while the US moved on, broke up some of the broadcasting cartels, and created a form of TV writing teamwork more akin to Silicon Valley start-ups, the BBC has gone backwards to a tottering hierarchy of drama executives with a massive bottleneck at the top. Given its 20th Century industrial structure, it's no surprise BBC drama still specialises in 20th century products.

While it may take a while to imagine a new system while preserving the innovative principle of public service broadcasting, it's not hard to spot what is currently dysfunctional and out of date. The domination of channel controllers, whose rise to power was then matched by the centralisation of drama departments is a uniquely British phenomenon. But channel controllers are probably one of the few groups of people left who still care about the various rebrands, strands and peculiarities of their schedule. The public are beginning to disbundle TV content in the same way they are online for articles and features in news and magazines. Overnight audiences have halved since I started writing for TV, with growing numbers playing catch up or download, on the long tail. Channels will become increasingly irrelevant to the audience. The middlemen will be cut out. Product will be key.

Yet it's the executives who still have power, and they are unlikely to write themselves out of a job or surrender the joys of being the nation's storyteller by proxy. That's why little has changed in the six years since I wrote my *Prospect* warning. Now this ignored problem could become an existential crisis for the BBC. With a party in power that is highly suspicious of the public sector element of public service broadcasting, and an ongoing charter renewal, those in control could lose power at a stroke, catastrophically. The only way some of them and nation's ranking as a top world dramatist can survive is if they create a more plural system – and tap the upsides of a heterogeneous mixed economy.

The appetite for great British TV drama has not diminished. The BBC still has a brand and a

focus on quality which could make that happen. But only if it drops the crony corporatism.

Recruit and train content allies

Dr Mark Lee Hunter

The BBC remains the world's benchmark for objective, information-rich news, but the share of the public that considers the news credible has been shrinking for over a decade. The Murdochs and Berlusconis of the world have convinced a large public that journalism is a vile enterprise. It is not enough for the BBC to say it does the same job that industry oligarchs claim to be doing, only better. The BBC has to do something they can't do.

One answer comes from stakeholder activists – people like Greenpeace, Bellingcat (who cracked the MH17 case), and the International Council on Clean Transportation (who cut off Volkswagen's head). They bring their followers news that the downsized news industry no longer wants or can afford to cover. They are now moving into what used to be considered strategic competencies of the news industry – the ones you need in order to survive – like investigative reporting. They are eating into the audience base of the news industry. But they can be partners and assets, and not just competitors.

No, they're not objective, like the BBC tries to be; they tell you what they want and how they want to get it. Yet the public doesn't seem to mind. (In fact, the public doesn't believe that it's possible for anyone to be truly objective.) The Huffington Post succeeded by allowing various stakeholders to speak for themselves. That strategy has since become a standard feature of online news business models. CNN is doing it. The French startup Médiapart is doing it. *Forbes* is doing it brilliantly for a business audience.

The problem is that only a minority of this self-interested content attains acceptable standards of veracity. But there are stakeholders who reach the highest standards, and those are the people the BBC wants and deserves as partners and allies.

Instead of simply quoting stakeholder newsmakers, or letting them do whatever they like, the BBC could create a branded avenue where news boutiques propose different kinds of quality information. In opening that street, the BBC would set rules that serve the public interest: No self-promotion at the expense of truth or equity. Prove what you say, and don't leave out facts just because you don't like them. Tell us why you're giving us this story. If someone gave you money to do it, or simply to exist, tell us who. If you can't be objective,

you'd better be fully transparent.

Stakeholder groups who meet high standards will become branded partners of the world's greatest news organisation. Purveyors of lies can't get those partners. The BBC will build a new audience with them. Public debate will rise to a new level, as expert stakeholders leap in. Public wealth will rise in the form of documentary proof of stakeholder arguments.

The BBC can share its reputation and news skills, on condition that it retains the right to set and enforce standards for cooperation. The BBC can win this game. There will be a learning curve, but success will have a long, long tail.

Dr. Mark Lee Hunter is co-founder of the INSEAD Stakeholder Media Project, the author of *Story-Based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists* (UNESCO 2011) and a founding member of the Global Investigative Journalism Network.

Shape the digital public sphere or die trying

Becky Hogge

When it transpired in May this year that the BBC would remove its database of recipes from the web in response to the Government's accusation that such online endeavours represent "imperial ambition"¹⁵⁸, the country was up in arms. Petitions were launched. Celebrity chefs were asked to respond. I was struck with sadness by how low our ambitions had sunk. Because twelve years ago we'd thought the BBC could do what it does now with cake recipes with *everything it has ever made*.

The BBC is a unique institution, a beautiful example of collective investment in the public sphere, and that is why so many people love it. It's also why twelve years ago, when the BBC announced its ambition¹⁵⁹ to put much of its archive online, published (like much of the content on the openDemocracy website) under a Creative Commons licence that allows people to watch, re-appropriate and republish it freely, that idea made so much sense. The Creative Archive, as it was then known, died a death at the altar of rights ownership – sacrificed in part to the BBC's awareness of its dominant position in the market and its role in stimulating the independent television industry. Instead we got the iPlayer: a fantastic project that nonetheless, when set against the potential of the BBC to enrich and define the digital public sphere, begins to look slightly pathetic.

Writing on Medium this May, Lloyd Shepherd, who had worked on the recipes database during a brief stint at the BBC, complained¹⁶⁰:

"The BBC could have a powerful public sphere strategy— a big public discussion about how the networked digital world needs a public space in the same way as telly and radio did, and how it is the BBC's role to do that. But it won't make the case for it..."

At first glance, treating the digital public sphere the same way we treat radio and TV seems wrong. Unlike radio and TV, which are broadcast on a limited resource – spectrum – the internet is unbounded, limitless. The web pioneers of the nineties and early 2000s believed the internet would usher in an age of radical plurality. Give everyone a voice, a machine to encode it and a network of limitless bandwidth over which to transmit it, they said, and you'd get a public sphere so rich it would make Jürgen Habermas blush. But the digital public sphere we have today is a long way off from that vision, because it turns out that a really

good way to make money online is by teaching computers how to entertain people with their own prejudices, and then selling their eyeballs to the highest bidder.

Commercial online endeavours build what Tim O'Reilly in 2004 called "architectures of participation"¹⁶¹: websites and platforms that transform the contributions of each user into more than the sum of their parts, through structured databases and machine-learning. But these all too soon become architectures of control, as we find ourselves locked in to platforms like Facebook and YouTube, stranded in silos designed to parcel us off to advertisers.

The online echo chamber

In his 2011 book, *The Filter Bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*, Eli Pariser portrays today's online environment as a place where technology corporations and the advertisers they serve use algorithms to define the news you see based on your salary, education and – crucially – your social milieu. The internet has ushered in an age of "me media" which consists of echo chambers. And the problem with these echo chambers is that when they come into contact with one another, conflict ensues. This is not good news for the public sphere.

If commercial interests create a digital public sphere that simply consists of separate communities that cannot meaningfully engage with one another, then we need non-commercial interests to counter that. We need market intervention. In short, we need to begin imagining the digital public sphere we want and working out how we might shape it. James Bennett's [proposal for public service algorithms](#)¹⁶² is just one idea to consider.

Achieving the digital public sphere we want

Right now, government intervention in the online space falls into two categories. The first is bandwidth, evidenced by the Government's ambitions to introduce a universal service obligation (USO) for broadband. This will be the first time a USO has been imposed on a historically commercial service – electricity, gas, post and telephone networks all have histories of public ownership. The second is protection from harmful or illicit content, embodied in various legislative and non-legislative (voluntary) schemes imposed on internet service providers.

This regulatory picture reveals how comfortable those in power are protecting the internet as a wholly profit-led information space. Indeed, digital rights campaigners, myself included, are

guilty of aiding and abetting the complacency as they justifiably resist “freedom from” intervention (disconnection for copyright infringers, family-friendly filters) while remaining silent on the need for positive intervention in the digital public sphere. For a start, we should be making a lot more fuss over the Government’s proposals to remove from the BBC’s new Charter its sixth purpose, “to develop emerging communications technologies and services”.

It is the sixth purpose that currently protects the BBC’s ventures into online services, experimentation that has been ongoing for almost two decades. The BBC’s online endeavours have always been contentious: at the beginning because they only benefitted the small percentage of licence fee payers who had got themselves online; later because they were accused of taking business away from commercial online content providers. But enabling the BBC to continue experimenting online is more vital than ever.

We are only just starting to see how digital technology is changing the contours of the public sphere. We know in the future that all media – newspapers, books, music, video, games – will converge online. What we may glimpse today without fully understanding is how information economics will dictate our discovery of and engagement with that media. Removing the sixth purpose now prevents the BBC from taking a more active role in this future and crafting it for the good of all.

What role for the BBC?

There are roles here both for the BBC and for its new regulator, OfCom. OfCom should deploy its internationally-recognised expertise and research resources to begin enriching our understanding of the digital public sphere, and the role it plays in our democracy. And the BBC needs to accept that its identity now extends beyond broadcast, by systematising and privileging its continued experimentation online. To do this, both institutions need to get a little braver than they have been to date about the need for intervention in this space. In this respect, I agree with [Liz Howell in her chapter](#) when she calls for a "committed enthusiastic champion for the BBC Online" at the top of the BBC.

Public service media is market intervention, and that’s fine. Labelling the BBC’s ambitions online “imperial” is disingenuous, because it conflates markets with democracies. Democracies need strong public spheres, and information markets, both online and off, may not deliver strong public spheres. Living in information echo chambers makes us not only more commercially exploitable but also more politically exploitable. Now more than ever, we need media to challenge our prejudices, not media to entrench them.

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Time for public service algorithms

James Bennett



We are all now used to encountering database algorithms in the form of recommendation engines – ‘if you liked this, you might also like ...’. Video-on-demand services are one of the key sites we encounter such algorithms: they promise us more of what we might like. The BBC’s iPlayer does this well, linking us to other episodes of the programme we’ve just watched

and shows ‘you may also like’. Having recently watched *Synth Britannia*, my recommendations screen is cluttered with music documentaries.

But is that really what a public service broadcaster should do: recommend more of the same? It used to be that, in a broadcast world, audiences were connected to different programmes, different genres, and different experiences by the schedule. Scheduling was – and still is – an art form. At its best, in a public service context, it exposes viewers and listeners to a mixed diet of content that opens new experiences and viewpoints: moving us from comedy, to news, to drama, to a music documentary to a current affairs programme: not to just another music documentary. Television was a window on the world that let us explore – albeit at the scheduler’s behest.

In the digital age the viewer is supposedly in control: choice is the driving mantra of our time. But recommendation engines serve to structure that choice. They are based, primarily, on encouraging us to watch more content. They play ‘safe’: if you liked a music documentary, you’ll like another one. If you liked *Top Gear*, here is some more *Top Gear*: keep watching.

But what if a public service algorithm also made some recommendations from left field – to open our horizons: if you liked *Top Gear*, here’s a programme on environmentalism and fossil fuel, or *Woman’s Hour*. If you liked a music documentary, here’s a sitcom. Choice will remain the key ingredient: but it should be a genuine choice – to choose to continue to watch more of the same, or have the option of exploring something new.

In a digital world, 'information, education, entertainment' should be appended by "Explore": the BBC should once again open up a window on the world. A PSB Algorithm would mark the BBC's services out as distinct from the market and connect viewers to a greater breadth of the Corporation's amazing output and a diversity of voices and viewpoints. And that is what PSB should always be about.

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The BBC's poetry is needed more than ever

Nick Fraser

Here's an old-style radical thought from a wayward spell of reading. Near the end of a great French novel, the romantic, imprisoned hero comes to a momentous conclusion. 'The best thing about being condemned to death,' he says, 'is that you remember all the poetry you have forgotten.'

By poetry, I don't mean British Standard Ritual – Royalism, Great Sports, Arts, Sciences, etc. – though that's what we tend to evoke when talking about the historic BBC. I mean the myriad ways in which the BBC, usually without being aware of it, has transformed the lives of others. Let me give two examples from my own past year.

I work at showing documentaries from all over the world on the domestic BBC. But I also help, with the assistance of the Why Foundation, based in Copenhagen, to make documentaries from all over the world available, via BBC World News, BBC Arabic and BBC Persian, along with public broadcasters all over the world, from Bhutan and Palestine to Bangladesh, to a global audience. These aren't new films, but they are still resonant. This week I watched *Rough Aunties*, a film originally made by the astounding Kim Longinotto for Channel Four about the efforts of a group of Durban women to rescue children from abusers. It's a wonderful film, tender and heart-breaking. No-one watching it can remain immune to the claims of shared humanity – and I mean this literally.

And I should recall, too, *India's Daughter*, banned by the government in India but shown last year by the BBC and many partners on Women's Day. I don't think the question of how it is that women are daily abused, not just in India, has elsewhere received such an airing, among millions and millions of viewers and tweeters. But there's no mention in the White Paper of the capability of the BBC to focus consciousness on subjects like this. And surely such a task belongs to the BBC in a fully globalized world. Who else can try to speak for us all in this way?

Outdated?

In *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (2012), Timothy Wu comes

to grips with the rapidly altering configurations of media power in our time.¹⁶³ But the BBC receives only cursory mention. Wu is interested in how governments and societies once dealt with monopoly, prior to the growth of huge private monopolies, and that's how he comes to the 1930s BBC – as a benign, kindly monopolist. It wouldn't occur to him to situate the BBC in the present, with the new monopolies. For Wu, and I suppose most of those crowding Silicon Valley, the BBC is old hat. Its genteel editorial selectivity is as dated as its quaint sense of editorial scruples. Sold off it would be worth a lot. But in its current, paternalistic guise, it must surely be of limited use.

I don't agree with this position. The old values of impartiality and objectivity aren't redundant. To be sure they're under threat, but that makes it necessary for the BBC to uphold them. They're threatened by a revival of interest in the power of state propaganda, in China and Russia, to be sure, but elsewhere, too – in places as diverse as Israel, Brazil, Egypt, South Africa. They are also threatened by the pervasive flood of half-truths of contemporary mass culture, coming to us not just via what is still called television, but via the internet too. I'm writing this with a post-Brexit hangover, contemplating what appears to be the wreckage of the British state and thus my own world. On the night, I feel the BBC and ITV managed to reconstitute their habitual smoothness of coverage. But some of the failure of the debate must be laid at the door of broadcasters. Do we really think enough energy went into unpacking the numerous lies and exaggerations? Don't we all think, whatever hopes we held for the result, that Brexit represented a serious advance for the forces of post-truth politics sweeping the world?

No, online hasn't turned out to be utopia. However the new populism is defined, we can agree that it feeds off ignorance, and the worldwide web hasn't, alas, seen off mass crassness. In a different, more deferential age, the BBC was created to combat ignorance. This is a struggle that we cannot now afford to ignore.

Old values for new times

But no, I don't feel the BBC is being bold enough. Others will probably criticize the BBC from a narrowly political position, meaning that it's too white, too old, and too middle class. This may well be the case, but I think the BBC can only begin to address such failings if it goes back to the matter of its own poetry.

This is the democratic, egalitarian poetry of self-enlightenment. We can wonder how, over a

period of many years, with its ingrained notions of class and propriety, British society rendered widespread throughout the world the notion that everyone should know enough to become a citizen. But that is a signal achievement, and in Britain and elsewhere the idea still exists in part as a consequence of the BBC.

I am struck by how much these notions seem alien to current debates about the future of the BBC. The White Paper has a stale, self-regarding air. It doesn't really address the question of what all of us need on our paths through the contemporary wilderness. (Surprisingly, it doesn't even pose the question of what the BBC should be doing on the Internet.) People like John Reith thought long and hard about such things. We don't do this now, but we should do. Try therefore to think how we might start over again if that were possible. How can we alternatively attempt to address what has become the Question of the BBC?

Much of the disapprobation directed towards the BBC derives from its presumed arrogance. While sensing that within the BBC the days of arrogance are past, I'd like to see a more magpie-like Beeb, accommodating more voices, and more genuinely pluralist. This was one of the goals formulated by Jeremy Isaacs when Channel Four started, in opposition to the starchiness of the BBC. Within broadcasting, however, interest in pluralism has lapsed, to be replaced by niche market obsessions. The BBC can only survive if it remains attached to the project of telling the truth. I'd like to see more thinking about this – and more recognition of how people throughout the world can be nudged into places where the truth becomes more available to them. I'd like to see a far bolder attempt on the part of the BBC to wrestle with the problems of the near future. And I'd like to see a real commitment to find and air new ideas.

I'll give one example of this. As I write, the BBC has just aired *Unlocking the Cage*, a film by Chris Hegedus and Don Pennebaker which retraces the efforts of Steven Wise, a lawyer from Florida, to establish the legal 'personhood' of intelligent animals, including chimpanzees such as Tommy, the film's imprisoned plaintiff and hero. This isn't an advocacy film in favour of human rights. Nor is it a conventionally 'balanced' treatment of the subject. The film just asks us to listen. But I am struck by how few of such films or radio programmes exist on the BBC. When new ideas enter the Beeb, they're often over-packaged and labelled. The reflex of caution prevails even now.

The BBC has talked about partnerships for many years. Too often, however, this has meant grand deals with presumed equals - or indeed devices for extracting money while giving

little in return, at which the Corporation has proved expert. (The BBC has done well out of its large-scale agreements with Discovery and PBS. However, few would argue that these highly lucrative arrangements led to a glut of imaginative or innovative programmes.) The BBC now needs to open itself up to genuine collaboration. It is still far too difficult to work with non-profit foundations, or private backers, let alone such massive new configurations as Google or Amazon. Nervousness is palpable when it comes to sharing editorial aims, or indeed accepting that the BBC shouldn't claim a monopoly on the truth. A truly open BBC will be more welcoming to outside influences and views. It must be freed to strike up partnerships where it wishes.

Why couldn't the BBC do a deal to share limelight with TED – an arrangement that would have led to much mutual benefit? What would be so wrong about a BBC/Netflix venture outside entertainment? Can one not envision large-scale educational projects in conjunction not just with the Wellcome Foundation (with whom the BBC has long been in conversation, and now has a deal) but places such as Open Society or Ford? Why not a BBC global project designed to foster global civic literacy?

In 1945, David Astor, shortly to become editor of the *Observer*, said that he and his staff should do 'everything that Hitler wouldn't have done.' This is a lesson we have to relearn, rapidly. Did we, ten years ago, really think Russia would be where it is? How about Italy? And Greece? Could we have envisaged an American media scene dominated by Fox News? And can we imagine a world surviving where such current phenomena as global mayhem, inequality or warming cannot be discussed by the widest possible audience? I think not. Humans can only hope to survive by drawing on every resource leading to what, in the old days, was known as civic literacy.

There's no contradiction between the obligation to be truthful and authoritative, and the imperative to be fresh, new and attentive – you just have to become worldly, in the best sense. With its own poetry, as well as contemporary savvy, the BBC should now feel freed to go into the world in search of a new self. We deserve no less.

Nick Fraser is Editor of *BBC Storyville*. This is a personal view and does not represent BBC policy.

Afterword

Niki Seth-Smith, Dan Hind

While this book was being edited the government published its 'Draft Royal Charter for the continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation'. One cannot help but be struck by the contrast. The contributors to *Rethinking the BBC* have offered a set of proposals and recommendations that take seriously the challenges of our time. Many of them are informed by the sense that the BBC should belong to the people who after all pay for its existence. Where there are criticisms they are generally motivated by a desire for the BBC to make good on the esteem and affection in which it is held.

The Draft Charter, on the other hand, remains serenely indifferent to the possibility of change. Elizabeth the Second, Defender of the Faith, informs us that 'the BBC shall continue to be a body corporate by the name of the British Broadcasting Corporation' and that 'the members of the Board of the BBC shall be members of the Corporation'. That nothing different was expected only lays bare the limits of our thinking. The most important single media operation in the country continues to be embodied in a handful of executives and political appointees. The gap between what is apparently 'common sense' and what is possible yawns wide.

The public purposes of the BBC – at any event so poorly publicised as to be effectively secret – have been revised to dispense with the formal duty to 'sustain citizenship and civil society.' Instead we are told that the BBC must 'provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them'. The entire resources of BBC journalism are to be deployed 'so that audiences can engage with major local, national, United Kingdom and global issues and participate in the democratic process, at all levels, as active and informed citizens.' If civil society means anything it means our collective capacity to reflect on, and perhaps change, 'the democratic process'. No such critical distance is permitted in the new form of words. Nor is there room to question the role of 'impartiality' that is now, post-Brexit, under renewed fire.

The institution's performance even in this regard is to be judged by itself and its regulator, Ofcom, while elected politicians circle in the Westminster shallows. There is no suggestion whatsoever that the people who pay for the BBC should have some formal and secure place in the production and revision of generally available accounts of the social world. We the public can complain. And we are consulted. But we have seen the results of the

mammoth, multi-level consultation process that was intended to inform the drawing up of the new Charter. The pretty scandal in which DCMS told the *Radio Times* that their 9k-strong submission had been read, before they had been sent the password to unlock them all, tickled the cynics among us: Did it matter whether they were read or not? *Rethinking the BBC* attempts a different kind of exercise, comparatively small in scale, yet with the firm premise that a larger and more diverse set of voices must play a part in shaping the future of the BBC

The internet might as well not have happened.

What will Britain look like in 2027, when this Charter period is due to finish? The United Kingdom (if it exists in its present form) will have transformed its relationship with Europe and the world - we will have been forced to confront the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution, as well as climate change and new forms of conflict. The Brexit referendum showed us our capacity for division when meeting the big issues of our age, and the media's hungry complicity in this. For all its weaknesses, the BBC has stood in the way of a US-style media landscape that has institutionalised this hunger.

It has done so as part of Britain's informal constitution. The duty to 'sustain citizenship and civil society' is a crucial part of this, as is its governance structure, with concerns around political influence unanswered by the re-organisation on offer. We cannot afford, in the next few years before a settlement with Europe is sealed, to maintain the UK's fatally blinkered understanding of constitutional matters, because doing so will mean relinquishing any semblance of democratic control over our future. In their diverse ways, while offering very different analyses, the authors brought together here take this seriously. Many chapters go so far as to suggest that the BBC will not (recognisably) survive without strengthening its claim to belong to the British public. Some see other public service broadcasters, and in some instances the market, as more able to deliver the public service content Britain needs. Complacency is questioned, along with the zeal for change that so often disguises the expansion of a distorted market logic into all forms of public life.

The Conservative government is committed to its vision of a BBC that doesn't rock the boat. But it understands that the BBC is a key component of British soft power – it's strength needed now, perhaps, more than ever.

But the BBC's reputation, and hence its global influence, is being tested as never before in the digital age. If it is to do the work at home and abroad expected of it by its defenders it will

have to change far more than the current government imagines., We will need to have the courage to ask what successful public media in the 21st century will look like. It is plain from these pages that another BBC is possible. As the rest of the constitution comes under scrutiny, there is every reason to think that what is possible will, sooner rather than later, become inevitable.

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