

18 February 2004

BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2 Cockspur Street
London SW1Y 5DH

Dear Sirs

Review of the BBC's Royal Charter

I refer to this document, which I have downloaded as a PDF file from the Net.

The following is my 12-point response to its 40+ pages - a document difficult to read and respond to, but probably worse for you to analyse as there is no pro-forma response format.

1. I value some of the (quasi) educational programmes on BBC 1 and 2, but many of these are impossible to view pleasurably because loud muzak is played to drown out the voice of the presenter/commentator (e.g. Horizon). Most of the other output is news (available elsewhere) or sport (little interest, except to wonder why no commentator understands the use of the adverb) or dire "soap" quality. A little higher-quality drama (e.g. Jonathan Creek) is thrown in occasionally to leaven the mixture.
2. However, absolutely nothing sets BBC television content apart from other channels, with the exception of the absence of adverts and presence of Teletext (which is slow, and with a myriad of spelling mistakes and grammatical errors to confuse and annoy). The general programming quality is indistinguishable from any other British channel, and many of the better-quality non-news programmes are repeated ad nauseum on one or other of the commercial channels anyway.
3. It used to be axiomatic that BBC output and information was absolutely true and unbiased. I am not sure that I believe this to be so now. Certainly I do not trust the BBC any more than I do any other channel.
4. You keep claiming that all BBC TV output is universally available and free-to-air (page 38). As I have complained to the BBC several times before, this is just not true. In this area (St Briavels, GL15) there is no useable free-to-air signal and so to receive BBC3 or BBC4 I have no option but to use Sky TV. A basic package costs almost £20 per month, but I can then receive many other non-BBC channels . . .
5. You refer to "significant take-up of broadband" on Page 12 and this might be an ideal medium on which to supply broadcast material. Except for St Briavels, GL15, of course, where broadband access is "not available" - rather like your free-to-air programmes mentioned above.

6. Accordingly, as far as value for money is concerned, I see minimal value for the licence fee of £116 per annum which I am required to pay even if I do not watch the BBC output for which it is notionally levied. To add insult to injury, if I wish to watch something on BBC3, effectively I have to pay more than double this amount again to Sky to be able to view this "free" output!
7. Effectively, the licence fee is just a tax, levied as it is on very nearly 100% of the population, and with its own wasteful costs of collection and extra costs of enforcement (detector vans etc.). It would be far more efficient, surely, whilst this fee exists, to merge it with general taxation - no collection costs and no evasion in return for a minimal increase in income tax. But I suppose that's too simple an idea to be worth considering.
8. One way for the BBC to generate more income would be to make very much more output available on DVD or Video. Quite a lot of radio output has been available for a while, and some TV output (such as Jonathan Creek, supra, but four years after first transmission) is starting to become available. Why not make **MOST** output available quickly and routinely (other than ephemera) and at a price low enough to discourage off-air recording but high enough to generate a positive cash-flow?
9. As far as the BBC's position is concerned, when the current charter expires, it should become absolutely independent, and certainly independent of government. This status should be, preferably, as a separate company, not overtly accountable to anyone but (naturally) subject to the rule of law. If this happens, it should not expect government funding (so no licence fee) and should have to pay its way commercially, as others do, perhaps with advertising revenue forming part of the income stream.
10. I listen a little to the radio, mainly radio 4, but the quality here is falling rapidly. Some output is labelled "comedy" though, in my view, in error. Presumably most news presenters are paid by the word, or syllable, as they gabble so fast; or are they paid by the number of times they interrupt the interviewee, or by how rude they are to him/her? (However, as far as news readers are concerned, two stand out - Harriet Cass and Charlotte Green. Their beautifully measured yet neutral tones and marvellously clear diction are a joy to hear, especially when compared with many heavy regional accents which often obscure the meaning of what is supposed to be being communicated.)
11. As far as drama on radio is concerned, "The Archers" has no equal; but that is 50 years old!
12. Finally, why are there no radio programme listings for Radio 7 on Sky (or in most newspapers for that matter)? Apart from the simple lack of information, the absence of a listing means that recording options are limited (only one programme can be taped for later listening, and one cannot switch between programmes automatically). This defect is one that should be remedied.

Yours faithfully,



A. S. Goodenough

P.S. I see no need to "publish" this response, but that is up to you.