

24 March 2004

BBC Charter Review Public Consultation
Dept for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur St, SW1Y 5DH

Dear Sir/Madam,

In response to your specific questions:-

(1) What the BBC does best is documentaries, news, current affairs, nature programs (eg Attenborough), history series (eg Schiama), general culture series (eg Clark's 'Civilisation'). What it does worst is trying to play the ratings game with endless soaps, quizzes, property makeovers, etc. Its Science programs are few, inferior and patronising. Why, for instance, the irritating 'listen with mother' tone of the Horizon program, which assumes that anything scientific or mathematical is over the head of the listener?

(2) The BBC should try to keep abreast of new technology, but without letting it become an obsession to the detriment of other things.

(3) The BBC programmes are still on the whole better than their rivals' programmes, despite determined attempts to dumb down in a mistaken pursuit of ratings. If the dumbing down does finally get the upper hand, the BBC will no longer have a reason to exist. On a point of detail, news bulletins on the radio are becoming excessively repetitive as if the BBC thinks nobody has an attention span greater than a few seconds.

(4) No, the BBC should not seek to get involved in commercial services. This is a slippery slope.

(5) The licence fee still works well, so why try to change it? It is the best and an essential way of guaranteeing the BBC's independence and protecting it from political interference, while providing a reliable source of funding.

(6) It is difficult for the public to judge how efficiently it is run internally, but it is important not to reform things just for the sake of reforming them.

(7) The current arrangement, with the governors in their present role, works tolerably well, and should not be gratuitously tampered with, least of all at the behest of politicians with axes to grind. As far as we can judge, any of the suggested alternative arrangements is likely to be worse. So-called 'independent' committees overseeing things are not really independent if the government of the day (of whichever party) can pack them with its own cronies.

(8) The public should of course be free to express its views, and be encouraged to do so, but not have any direct influence on matter of detail. The BBC would of course be well advised to try to keep the public on its side.

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Overall view:

The most valuable feature of the BBC is its 'public service' and educational role, and its obligation (however imperfectly met sometimes) to be objective and impartial. This is guaranteed by licence-fee funding, and should not be tampered with. As regards output, the BBC should strive for high quality, not high ratings. If it does that, it will retain the support of licence-fee payers, as they cannot get high quality from anywhere else.

NB: I don't mind any of this response being published, but I do not want my name or address to be published.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature, possibly "John", is written above a horizontal line that serves as a separator.