

**Michael Neal**

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**Dear Reviewer**

## **BBC CHARTER REVIEW PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

I have retained the format and substance of the 'Your BBC Your Say' questionnaire but have added one or two questions of my own.

### **What characteristics do you think (should) define the BBC?**

- Exists to inform, educate and entertain the British public
- Produces, procures, schedules, and transmits programmes broadcast by means of signals suitable for reception by television and radio equipment
- Comprises a core set of English language channels structured to suit a broad and balanced selection of tastes together with a subsidiary set of local and special interest channels, transmitting in other languages where appropriate
- Is a significant element of the British Constitution
- Is an autonomous entity owned by the public and accountable to a Board of Governors
- Is independent of Government and commercial sponsorship
- Is free of on-air commercial advertising
- Is distinguished from competitive offerings by the rich quality of the production, selection and innovation of its programmes
- Presents news and current affairs with a hunger for the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth
- Provides a shop window for the UK through the World Service
- Is an exemplar to broadcasters everywhere
- Is trusted by democratic communities and by others worldwide
- Is constrained by Royal Charter, the law, budgetary limits and the public interest

### **What do you value most about the BBC?**

**Coverage (particularly):** current affairs, drama, news, recitals (for example from opera and musicals), rugby, science, thrillers (with UK settings), weather forecasts

**Coverage (occasionally):** arts, classical music, cricket, documentaries, educational cooking, films, gardening, situation comedy, wildlife

**Coverage (never):** football, game shows, makeovers, other sport, personality cooking, pop music, reality TV, soap operas, travel

**Nations, communities etc:** These are matters for the groups to judge.

## **How should the BBC adapt to cope with changes in technology and culture?**

**Technology:** Pursue digital terrestrial transmission with all speed. Aim eventually, in the interest of national security, to establish the BBC's own satellite system, featuring non-BBC channels if appropriate.

By all means exploit the Internet but not as sole source either of programme material or of information, at least until the Internet is much more widely used.

**Culture:** The core service must adjust to changes in the general set of beliefs and values shared by the majority of the public. Minority interests should be catered for by subscription service.

## **What do you think of the services the BBC provides?**

The transmission service is excellent and will be even better when digital coverage is complete.

The World Service is something to be proud of and is an exemplar of all that is good about the UK.

Unworthy pursuit of ratings leads sometimes to populist and rather shallow offerings.

Channel choice is splendid; it may even be too rich.

## **Should the BBC (continue to) run commercial services?**

As a subsidiary source of revenue, emphatically yes. Valid revenue streams, i.e. those directly related to programme material, should include DVDs, books, periodicals, programme sales (worldwide), and real time sales to other broadcasters, for example Sky.

## **How should we pay for the BBC?**

The licence system should be dropped. Commercial on-air advertising and direct sponsorship should remain prohibited. Revenues from the BBC's own commercial services (see above) should be welcomed.

The British taxation system is the most efficient and equitable way of funding the core service of the BBC. The tax can be collected either locally through the council (perhaps supported by central grant for the more impoverished regions) or centrally through the main exchequer. A specific grant to support the World Service would also be in the public's overall interest.

The foregoing approach, however, does weaken the perception of independence of the BBC; it might also upset Brussels (perish the thought). An alternative therefore would be to provide the core service by subscription. Members of the public able to prove that payment was beyond their means would have the subscription paid by the local council. Special interest services would in any event be paid for by private subscription.

## **Is the BBC organised in the most effective and efficient way?**

These are matters for the Director General. No outsider can comment sensibly without detailed analysis, but...

**Effective:** The output of the BBC is very good so by and large the BBC achieves what it sets out to do. The Corporation's zealous political correctness, however, must diminish its effectiveness as also its bias towards youth and the left (but then an elderly Tory would say that).

**Efficient:** As in any large organisation excessive bureaucracy is bound to exist. The leadership of the Director General will determine what level of efficiency is actually achieved.

The key criterion is Value-for-Money and, given that the BBC's function is essentially creative, that is what generally we get.

BBC income and expenditure should be a matter of public record and subject, periodically, to external audit.

## **How should the BBC be regulated?**

It is the Director General's job, with the support of a Board of Directors, to determine how the BBC is run internally.

**Board of Governors:** This should operate very much at arm's length from the Corporation itself, and be funded separately.

The Board's principal function is to ensure that the definition of the BBC (see above) is inviolate and, thereby, protect the public interest. The Board should also administer an independent system for the collection of data related to the measurement of performance.

Board members should be untarnished by political association and should be appointed by the House of Lords or some derivative thereof.

The Board's principal sanction over the BBC will be the selection and removal of BBC Directors.

## **How do we ensure that the BBC is properly accountable to the public and parliament?**

The BBC should be accountable to the Board of Governors. The Board of Governors in turn should be accountable to the House of Lords. This suggestion assumes that the composition of the House of Lords, guardian as it is of the British Constitution, is in accordance with the will of the people rather than that of any particular political party (scope for another consultative review?).

## **How do we ensure that the BBC is properly accountable to the public and parliament?**

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Indeed the public should have a greater say and influence than now. A well publicised and much wider network of audience research groups will help; suitably constructed market surveys will also be valuable.

## **How should the performance of the BBC be measured?**

While BBC programmes are clearly obliged to attract significant audiences, head-on comparison of ratings with other broadcasters is not appropriate. Each transmission of a BBC programme should instead have a rating target set by budget holders.

Audience research groups and market surveys (see above) will measure ratings and provide feedback. Interactive technology will in time enrich this feedback and may even replace it.

The Board of Governors should monitor rating targets and results for substance. Detailed results and the comments of Governors should be published, say, quarterly.

Subscription levels will also provide measures of performance.

## **What should be done now?**

- Make it a condition of the Government's granting of the Sky broadcasting licence that Sky must transmit each of the main terrestrial channels (e.g. BBC1, BBC2, ITV, CH4) Free-to-View. The Government may have to broker an appropriate deal to achieve this. Such action will restore the current value of the reception licence, will remove some of the suspicion that the Prime Minister is colluding with elements of the media and it may even win some votes.
- Publish a detailed plan for the completion of the terrestrial digital system with an explanation of delays
- Exploit this consultation process to extend the scope for audience feedback on all broadcasting issues including judgements on channel balance and programme quality.
- Ensure that BBC information on the Internet is also available in printed form.
- To inform the later stages of this consultancy and review, publish an information pack that shows (a) the current financial and operational structure of broadcasting in the UK including transmission networks and (b) similar information relating to a selection of broadcasters worldwide.

**I look forward to the next steps in the consultation; do keep in touch.**

*Michael Neal,*