

JOHN C. REED



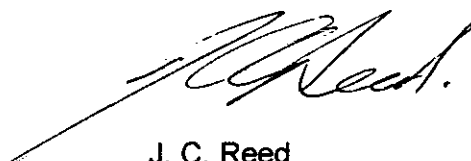
24 March 2004

BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London
SW1 5DH.

Dear Sir,

I enclose a copy of my thoughts and comments as a contribution to the debate on the forthcoming Review of the BBC Charter and I trust it will be considered together with the rest of the contributors.

Yours sincerely,



J. C. Reed

BBC Charter Review

Comments

The BBC is virtually the only public service media in the country. Whilst the press, in the main, purport to be free and unbiased it is obvious, even to the most casual observer, that they all have their own particular slant to their reporting, following the prejudices and whims of their various proprietors. Even those controlled by a board of trustees still adopt a particular 'line' from their editorial control

Most other broadcasting companies rely on advertising to a great extent, making them subject to undue pressures and restraints in their output with the obvious desire not to upset or annoy the companies who supply the revenue for their operations. There have been many examples in the past of both radio and television output incurring the displeasure of advertisers.

It is only the BBC who are not subject to the above disadvantages, with the organisation under the control of an independent body of governors who are specifically charged to uphold the independence and public service ethic in it's management and output. But this can only be realised if the board are resolute in their purpose and refuse to be swayed from this course by outside pressure, be it from private individuals (however self important), from private or public organisations and most of all from the government and body politic!

The recent fiasco of the Hutton report with the government using the tragic suicide of a WMD investigator following tremendous pressure exerted on him to support a particular policy and the ensuing furore after a mistaken report by a journalist was used to blow things out of all proportion, allowing a full frontal attack on the integrity of the BBC by both media and government, is an example of how biased attacks can be made which can disrupt the whole organisation if the controlling board is not resolute enough in the protection of it's personnel and it's public service ethic.


A formula must be found which protects the board's independence and prevents it being forced to follow a particular line. The public deserves to hear all sides of an argument presented to them and thus enabled, come to a reasoned assessment on a subject. The most open form of control of the Board of Governors would be via a standing committee of the House of Commons. This would ensure that all decisions taken in respect of the Board would be subject to public scrutiny and would enable the public to express their opinions on any subject by contact with their M.P.'s.

It would appear that the BBC is being pushed steadily toward a more commercial stance in an effort to maintain or increase audience numbers and is consequently tending to drop it's standards of programming in order to compete in the numbers game with other independent commercial organisations. This means that many serious and informative programmes are either being pushed to less popular time slots or are being

dropped altogether. This pandering to the lowest common denominator must not be allowed to conflict with the basic tenets of the organisation to inform and educate the listeners and viewers. This is especially true of television programming where there are many poor productions, both imported and home produced, being introduced to the schedules in order to compete in audience numbers. Whilst this attitude continues to permeate the thinking of executives and producers they are not serving the best interests of their viewers or of the organisation.

The BBC must continue to be publicly funded and thus enabled to present all sides of an argument without restraint, and return to transmitting the best of informative and entertainment programmes without the necessity of sticking slavishly to audience figures and ratings. The audience which radio 4 continues to hold is indicative of a large body of people who are prepared to listen to and enjoy more weighty and serious programmes, and television producers should acknowledge this in their schedules. It can never hope to compete fully with the power of big business and advertisers and it should not be required to do this. Whilst there is no inherent objection to the organisation marketing specialized and niche products it should not be required to do this purely to raise extra revenue. The BBC has a significant roll to play in the presentation of the British point of view to the rest of the world in it's overseas broadcasting, and whilst this should obviously follow general government policy, the programmes should be as free from restraint as possible.

The funding allocation for the organisation must be sufficient to allow it to remain in the forefront of technology, continuing with the development of interactive television and internet services, thereby allowing more people with slender resources to participate in these advances.


24 March '04.