

16 April 2004

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Dear Michelle

This is a corrected version of the late comments I sent in yesterday. If possible please replace that version (dated 15 April) with this one. Sorry for the inconvenience.

Review of the BBC's Royal Charter

What do you value about the BBC?

In our fluid society, where self-serving commercial objectives and shortsighted political pressures currently dominate all other considerations, the BBC provides an oasis where the public interest prevails. People trust the BBC because they see it as more independent than almost any other source.

Some defend the monarchy as a stable bastion in changeable times. But I would argue that the BBC serves this function 100 times more effectively than the monarchy.

While the quantity of information escalates, our ability to absorb it has barely changed at all. So we are more dependent than ever on *gatekeepers* who can help us sort the wheat from the chaff. TV and radio can serve this gatekeeper role more influentially than newspapers because their limited airtime demands that they distil things to a greater degree than the print media. And all those who are viewing or listening hear the whole message. This places TV and radio in a very powerful position, making it far more important that at least some channels – and in particular the BBC – should operate distinctly in the long-term public interest.

The BBC's most important aims are to *educate* and *inform*. But the BBC's activities should not be restricted to this 'core curriculum'. It also provides high quality art and entertainment, setting a standard for other channels – provided it leads, rather than adopting a me-too approach to chase ratings (possibly one weakness recently).

How should the BBC adapt to changes in technology and culture?

New technologies give the BBC the opportunity to meet the needs of a wider range of interest groups. See also next.

What do you think of ...BBC services

Broadly BBC TV programmes are good. Many are exceedingly good. (I hear little radio at present, though in earlier decades I was an ardent listener to Radio 3 – now I play music so listen less.)

While the BBC has been limited to its two TV channels (BBC1 and BBC2), it has had to provide a broad fare to please a wide audience. The extra channels made possible by new technology allow the BBC to cater for more interest groups. For example, many of the programmes on BBC1 and BBC2 do not interest me (e.g. endless gardening and house decorating programmes, darts on BBC2!) Also in documentaries I am concerned that serious subjects are increasingly styled up (dumbed down?) with not very informative graphics and irritating intrusive music which prevents one hearing – let alone understanding – the often highly interesting explanations being made. Explanatory graphics can add greatly to meaning, but pure garnishes (though perhaps cheaper and less challenging to produce!) add little.

However I do find the specification for BBC 3 and BBC 4 (especially 4) on page 32 very appealing, and I look forward to getting the equipment to receive them.

There is far too much USA material on the BBC. I feel far more European than American and would like to see far more European programme – in the original language with subtitles (some of us do speak foreign languages!). Children's programmes are especially overloaded with USA things. Surely we have a British culture which the BBC should be fostering.

The absence of advertising from BBC programmes is an enormous bonus. Some 15 minutes of ads every hour on TV 3 and 4 is a huge turn-off. This is sad as Channel 4 especially has some excellent programmes; I only watch them by recording them so I can fast-forward through the ads – a tedious roundabout method.

But it is worrying that the BBC seems to be filling the gaps *between* programmes (mercifully not in the *middle* of programmes) with promotional material which is almost as irritating as ads.

Should the BBC provide something for everyone?

Yes – and even sport, though I almost never watch it myself. Why?

- Because the BBC has a role to play in setting standards at every level.
- Because everyone who has paid the Licence Fee (which still seems to be the best funding option) should get something of quality for their money.

Should the BBC run commercial services?

The public would suffer if the BBC did not run some commercial services – for example selling the book of the programme, in the case of educational programmes. But the tail should not wag the dog. The commercial activities should support its broadcasting activities and should not become an end in itself. A limit of some 10% might be set.

Why? Politicians could see the BBC as a cash-cow to pay for its own programmes. That would lead to programmes designed to make money – prejudicing the BBC's public interest role.

Paying for the BBC

Funding by advertising or sponsorship

Above all the BBC should not be funded by commercial advertising or sponsorship. I feel more strongly about this than about any other aspect:

- The resulting commercial pressures would distort the type and quality of programme made, and prejudice the BBC's independence.
- Advertising is already grossly intrusive on other channels. For example good programmes on Channel 4 are ruined by about 4 breaks per hour.

Direct government funding

No. This would threaten the political independence of the BBC.

Subscription

No – although this looks attractive at first glance.

Subscription misses the whole point of the BBC being a high quality national cultural resource – the oasis in the desert of information sources provided by commercially motivated services. *Subscription* is inappropriate for reasons similar to those for make museums free.

Licence Fee

Compared with the crippling disadvantages of all these other options, the Licence Fee remains a good option, in spite of its faults.

The chief fault of a Licence Fee is that it is regressive – people pay the same regardless of income. The theoretical best way of dealing with this – relating the fee to a persons Income Tax Code – would presumably be prohibitively expensive to operate? So what about the less perfect method of varying the Licence Fee according to the number of sets in the household? Presumably the rich have more sets than the poor.

A common criticism of the Licence Fee is that it is unfair on those who don't use the BBC. But this criticism is in appropriate for the reasons given above for not funding the BBC by *Subscription*.

Organisation and infrastructure of the BBC

Should the BBC remain a single organisation?

Yes. Do not divide it by *medium*, because its role as a national *cultural* resource is independent of medium.

Should the BBC make as well as commission programmes?

Yes. Because only an organisation which practises a skill can intelligently commission work in that skill. (I have experience of this in design areas such as architecture, and in doing and commissioning building research.)

Governance and regulation

All public service broadcasters should be firmly (not loosely) regulated for the *independence* and *quality* of their output.

Yours sincerely,

David Rennie

