

BBC Charter Review Consultation  
Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
2-4 Cockspur Street  
LONDON SW1Y 5DH

11th March 2004

Dear Sirs,

Most Significant

Having just carefully reread the main text of Review of the BBC's Royal Charter, December 2003, I wish I could answer many of the important questions you ask there. As this and the appendices show, the BBC has many parts with many functions. I know these compete for attention and revenue with similar broadcasters and other, often quite different, sources. But how could I, who listen to a tiny fraction of the BBC's output on radio and television and very occasionally visit its website and who know even less about most of its competition, tell you how it should be run?

One answer I can give, I do not object to the licence fee and though 67, do not wish to have it paid for me should I reach 75.

One hard reply occurs to me. Although the foreword by the minister opens by noting the special contribution the BBC has made to the nation and its high esteem around the world, only in para.11 are its founding aims to educate, inform and entertain noted. These aims, under a Royal Charter, established the BBC as an aristocratic institution charged to do good. Yet government has placed it under a regulator as if it were a capitalist company seeking profits. And the Review asks several times whether the BBC threatens commercial broadcasters but never whether they undermine its noble mission.

The underlying problem is civilization is not a natural state and if its people are consistently given what they want, they go wild. For example, if numerous channels, many desperate for audience or income, find they can survive only by exploiting our worst aspects rather than by nurturing our best, the good on which we all depend may collapse.

Two easier features of the evolving environment seem to me pertinent to the future of the BBC: The low marginal cost of watching attractive programs encourages passive input rather than reflection and active output: AND Numerous programs encourage spending. So I am not surprised by rising rates of obesity, apathy, depression and debt in adults nor by children less able to converse and play. And I fear emphasis on what people want is fueling dangerous hedonism.

With regard to the questions implicit in para.12 and explicit in para.14, given the circumstances, I find little wrong with the numerous ways the BBC discharges its duty to educate, inform and entertain and to exploit its assets and I do not support outsourcing its program making. But I am concerned by threats to it from competitors serving narrow commercial goals and less interested in Britain, some of whose programs appear free.

Maybe Plato was right to fear the poets! I fear the Review is enthral to clever technology and competition and should reflect more on the social consequences of broadcasting. Regulation can curb the worst aspects of bad programs. But good broadcasting requires good program makers, wise broadcasters and discerning viewers and listeners. It can be destroyed by too much freedom, self-interest, competition and choice useful as these are in moderation.

Sincerely

*G. C. A. Talbot*

George C.A. Talbot