

BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur St
London
SW1Y 5DH

Dear Sirs,

I am grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the current BBC Charter review. The leaflet publicising this consultation invites comment on eight issues described as 'key questions'. My rather broad-based responses are as follows.

BBC Coverage

This country must maintain a publicly funded broadcasting organisation with a mandate to inform impartially and accurately, to educate and promote learning, and to provide entertainment of a type that finds difficulty in attracting commercial sponsorship. Only these criteria can justify the funding of its operations by a mandatory universal licence fee. I support the continued role of the BBC in providing this impartial service; for many years it has fulfilled its function admirably. During the past decade, however, a significant proportion of BBC output has not matched these standards. This divergence away from the restrictions of the Charter appears to reflect some desire on the part of BBC Management to be loved rather than respected. I cite some trivialisation of science broadcasting and increasing partiality in News and Current Affairs.

Throughout its history, one can only admire BBC's unique coverage of science, broadly defined to include objective investigation from Archaeology to Zoology. Whilst welcoming the increased quantity of science programming in recent years, its quality is now threatened. Much of the output is trivialised by BBC's modern obsession with popularism. Hypothesis is presented as fact and speculation is rife, though rarely accompanied by the necessary caveats. Scientific rigour is increasingly pushed to the margins. The educational value of ecological programming, so strong in the Attenborough era, has been diminished by the recent stream of programmes in which wild mammals are allocated Christian names and in which animal behaviour is dramatised to increase its emotional appeal. What should be educational is now reduced to anthropomorphic entertainment.

BBC News and Current Affairs programmes, once focused and impartial, seem increasingly to be driven by a pre-ordained editorial agenda. All too often, items presented as news are little more than advertisements for subsequent BBC feature programmes, covering issues that can no longer be classified as 'news'. Editorially-driven comment and opinion are intertwined with news. On some, particularly political issues, the opinions of BBC editors have clearly influenced objectivity. Editorial influence in News and Current Affairs programming is applied through the selection of interviewees, the selection of studio audiences, the selection of topics and the line of questioning adopted by presenters. Indeed, the BBC interview has become a very clumsy instrument of enquiry, often self-defeating. Interviewees are increasingly subjected to assault by blunt instrument rather than the verbal rapier which was once the mark of a BBC interview. Is this a result of centralised editorial policy or are BBC interviewers really incapable of using wit and vocabulary to challenge their subjects? Some BBC Current Affairs programmes, particularly on Radio 4 and 5, have become blighted by a sneering cynicism which has damaged impartiality beyond repair. What has happened to BBC standards here?

It sometimes seems that the only accurate and entirely objective programming in News and Current Affairs is to be found on the BBC Parliament service, where the live presentation of business during the hours of sitting is entirely free of editorial influence. When editorial bias emerges in a newspaper, one can cease to fund that organisation. One is denied this sanction in the case of the BBC and therefore one should expect strict adherence to the principles that justify its funding.

I am one of the many millions around the globe who greatly appreciate the quality and range of radio programmes presented on BBC World Service. Here is a service which has adhered to the standards of objectivity and balance once common to all BBC services. It is regrettable that domestic services have diverged from this common standard of impartiality.

New Technology

The evolution of technology is a continuous process and technophiles will often urge the adoption and adaptation of every advance that becomes available. Such advice presents a dilemma to those charged with sensible management of the BBC budget. There is great temptation to invest in every new opportunity - 'we can, therefore we must' - without sensible appraisal of its utility. In my view, BBCi is a prime example of this trend. Substantial investment in technology for which the likely uses are essentially trivial. Only slightly more rational is the investment in several rather specialised digital radio and TV services that can be accessed by relatively few of the national audience and are of interest to only a small proportion of those who have access. I am at a loss to understand the rationale underpinning such decisions. What was the business justification for investment? Several services seem to duplicate programming already widely available on Commercial stations and one must question why licence revenue has been expended on such output?

I would single out for praise the BBC Internet service. It fully justifies the investment and operational cost. It provides the BBC audience with information and an easily accessible mechanism for essential interaction with the organisation. In my view, the BBC has properly adapted this technology for its use and its websites are a model of best practice.

Commercial services

BBC should certainly expand its commercial activity. It should be permitted and required by Government to extend its commercial operations far beyond the current production of magazines and the sale of old programmes on DVD, tape etc. I should like to see the organisation establish BBC Commercial services on television and radio that are funded by subscription and/or by commercial advertising. These services should carry that proportion of BBC programming that cannot be distinguished from similar offerings on Commercial channels. Such programmes should no longer be sheltered and subsidised under the banner of Public Sector Broadcasting. Division of BBC activity into BBC/PSB and BBC/ Commercial would take much of the heat out of the licence fee debate. It would provide for BBC an independent source of commercial funding so that it might continue to make programmes suitable for these BBC Commercial services.

Let BBC/PSB incorporate BBC1 and 2, Educational programmes (OU etc.), BBC Parliament, Radio 2, 3, 4, 5Live, World service. These services should be refocused and funded by the licence fee.

Let BBC Commercial incorporate BBC 3 and 4, News 24 and CBBC, Radio 1, 5Liveextra, 1Xtra, BBC 6 and 7 and Asian Network. The daily output from local BBC Radio stations is virtually indistinguishable from that of local commercial stations, and these should be included here. All of these services should be funded by revenue from advertising and/or subscription.

The BBC is already engaged in the production and publication of advertising, and not only in its magazines. I wonder if BBC management realises just how many listeners/viewers are irritated and annoyed by the extensive BBC self-advertising on both TV and radio? How much

expenditure is devoted to the preparation and screening of programme advertisements on TV and to what effect? Is there any analysis of impact? Many interviews and features within the daily blanchmange of chatter on Radios 4 and 5 have as a significant objective the advertisement of an imminent programme or series of programmes on BBCTV. Let BBC cease this intrusive and inescapable advertising. BBC programmes are widely advertised in Radio Times and similar commercial guides, on the Internet, in every newspaper, both daily and weekly, on teletext and other information services. Enough. Prohibit such advertising on the public sector broadcasting channel.

The Licence Fee

The collection of an universal licence fee can only be justified if BBC adheres rigidly to the principles of public sector broadcasting which serve to distinguish it from other service providers. In the past decade I have sensed an ambition by some to broaden the role of the BBC and relax its bounding principles. There is no doubt that these are restrictive; one assumes that they are designed to be so. There is a genuine conflict here and one hopes that this current Consultation will be paralleled by some objective analyses of options at the tactical level rather than the usual broad-brushed strategic studies. As suggested above, I would favour the division of BBC operations into two clearly separated businesses; BBC/Public Sector Broadcasting funded by the licence and rigidly bound by the principles of impartiality and public interest; BBC Commercial funded by advertising revenue and/or subscription and carrying the substantial proportion of BBC output that is indistinguishable from the offerings of other commercial providers. By this means, the BBC would become responsible for the generation of a commercial revenue stream to fund its own ambitions. The Government should then reduce the Licence fee to a level reflecting that proportion of BBC output focused on public sector broadcasting.

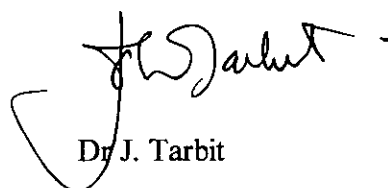
Regulation and Accountability

The current organisational structure of the BBC is long past its sell-by date. BBC management is funded by its customers without giving them the possibility of any sanction (financial or otherwise) relating to performance. The Board of Governors, as an overseeing body, is complicit in this management and yet it is solely responsible for quality control and regulation of management action. In this respect, the BBC alone has benefitted from exceptional treatment amongst the several players in the broadcasting market place. In which other line of business would Government allow such a state of affairs to exist?

A clearer separation of responsibilities for the direction of business and for the regulation of business is essential to encourage transparency and to satisfy public concern. Perhaps this would be most easily achieved by revising the terms of reference for BBC Governors, confining their responsibilities to those of an overseeing body guiding BBC management in the development of their business. The Regulatory function should be transferred out of the BBC purview and awarded to the quasi-Government body responsible for regulation of standards across all broadcasting outlets. This body should be strengthened to absorb the additional work and more closely linked to the relevant Committee of the House of Commons.

In that way, a clearly independent body would monitor BBC adherence to its public sector broadcasting responsibilities and thus more easily justify the privilege of a universal licence fee from which only the BBC benefits.

Yours faithfully,



Dr J. Tarbit