

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

Dear Sir/Madam,

I have enclosed some thoughts and suggestions about the function of the BBC and its importance to the world. To give some perspective on my views, I thought it might be useful to include some information about myself.

I am 24 years old. I studied Maths at the University of London, obtaining a 1st-class MSci degree. I have analogue TV and listen to Radios 4, 5, 3 and 2, as well as various commercial stations, using an analogue radio. I tend to watch BBC1 and 2 the most, with Channel 4 a significant majority of the rest. I usually vote in local elections only: I find that no national political party's policies match my views sufficiently closely.

Some of my suggestions relate more to the BBC's policies than to its Charter or the actions of government. I trust these suggestions will be forwarded to the BBC.

I hope my thoughts will be helpful to you.

Yours faithfully,



John Walter.

## Thoughts on the function of the BBC

In my opinion the BBC is the best broadcaster currently available. Although other channels have areas which they do well, they tend to do other things badly or in an undesirable way. Until recently the BBC has produced a wider range of programmes than any other broadcaster (in the UK, at any rate) while generally maintaining high standards. Recently its standards have started to drop, and it is in order to restore them to their previous high standards that I make these suggestions.

I would also like to point out that the BBC is not there just to broadcast to Britain. Its overseas operations such as the World Service are a great asset to it and should be treated with as much care as the domestic services.

The most important and distinctive feature of the BBC is its independence from a number of potentially disruptive factors. I will deal with them first.

### 1. Independence of outside influence

This is particularly important to the BBC's overseas services. The BBC World Service provides a source of trustworthy news to people around the world. It is important to remember that the World Service is not "just another broadcaster" as are the domestic channels: it is widely thought of as the best and most reliable source of news. Much of the BBC's good reputation abroad is given by its independence: it is seen as an impartial reporter.

The BBC's position as the best world-wide reporter of news gives a benefit to the UK too, since the World Service looks at the news from an educated, international perspective.

For the good reputation of the BBC to be preserved, it is vital that the BBC should be protected not just from outside interference but from even the appearance of interference. For this reason it is a bad idea for politicians and advisors to attack the BBC, however much the immediate national interest might tempt them: attacks and forced reforms will inevitably diminish the appearance of independence and damage the intelligent international interest.

### 2. Commercial independence

The BBC's commercial independence is an integral part of its character, and could be used to greater effect. The fact that the BBC does not take advertising makes it less dependent on audience figures than its commercial rivals, which makes it freer to make potentially unpopular programmes such as new comedy, documentaries and screenings of concerts and plays, as well as having more scope for "public-service broadcasting" such as televising Parliament. In my opinion this type of programme is what the BBC does best, and what the commercial channels often do badly or not at all. (I should stress that such programmes are not necessarily unpopular: programmes such as *The Blue Planet*, *Goodness Gracious Me* and *Leonardo* are very popular, but probably could not have been made by ITV or Sky.)

As the number of commercial channels increases, it is likely that the need for extra funding will make the needs of advertisers even more important and thus the incentive to produce risky programmes even less. The BBC is in an ideal position to make more such programmes: it could be released almost entirely from the necessity of attracting huge audiences and instead be expected to create interesting and experimental programmes. This would benefit the commercial channels, since they could then make more programmes that appeal to advertisers, and the public, since it would safeguard the availability of good documentaries and screenings; and it need not be a handicap to the BBC provided it was made clear that government policy was that the BBC should not be concerned about huge audiences.

### 3. Independence of new technology

To be an effective public service broadcaster, the BBC has to make reasonable efforts to reach all the people who want to see or hear it. For this reason it should avoid moving finally into new technologies (i.e. abandoning the old technologies) until **both**:

- a) the new technology is sufficiently developed to provide an excellent service, paralleling what the old technology provides;
- b) the demand for the old technology has almost entirely ceased.

For example:

- there are still pockets of Britain in which a roof aerial is necessary to get good reception of FM, so until this was solved the MW transmissions of Radio 3 should not have been abandoned (it is very unfortunate that the station for which good quality is most important should be the one to lose its AM frequency!);
- digital TV does not yet parallel analogue TV because no way has been found of allowing any video recorder to record one digital channel while another is being watched;
- the analogue TV transmission should not be abandoned until approximately 98% of viewers in the current analogue TV transmission area are receiving (not "could receive") TV by other means.

I acknowledge that the interpretation of my specifications is open to challenge; so I would suggest that an independent body (perhaps OFCOM, if it is sufficiently free from political pressure) should be given responsibility for inquiring into whether the two conditions have been met before the abandonment of a service can go ahead. This would, of course, not apply only to the BBC, but it is particularly important for the BBC because of its public service remit.

### Possible beneficial use of technology

Technology can, of course, have beneficial effects; and as storage and bandwidth become cheaper the Internet could provide a great advance in choice for viewers and listeners. At the moment one can download the last episode of many current radio programmes; with more storage the last series or three-month period of every radio programme could be made available. This would give people greater flexibility: for example, someone noticing a new series of a programme could download the previous series to gauge its interest and suitability. It would also go some way towards solving the problems of two interesting programmes being on different networks at the same time, and arguments about which programmes should be on which network.

Eventually this service could be extended to TV, allowing a viewer to download the previous episodes of a series he had just discovered.

It would also be possible to obtain an old programme much more easily than at present. The programmes could be kept on a central server and "burnt" onto recordable CDs or DVDs. This would enable individual orders from students or listeners to be filled.

Finally, the text display on digital radios could be used to greater effect. It could be made to show the name and other details of the music that is playing, or information about the person speaking on a speech programme, or details of when the programme is repeated, or the phone numbers and e-mail addresses for a phone-in programme.

### Public participation

Direct but edited public participation in programmes such as current affairs and sports coverage has had some very good effects, effectively enlisting the help of thousands of brains instead of just the production team's. I would pick as especially helpful the "snooker clinic" in which snooker players answer viewers' technical questions.

I would like to suggest that this idea could be extended to other types of programme, such as drama or (at a slight stretch of the imagination) documentaries. Viewers could suggest a plot for a "soap", for example, or give their views on how the current plot should be resolved. Perhaps ideas for documentaries could be solicited (certain types of animal seem to get much more attention than others) and suggested subjects for programmes such as *Just a Minute*.

This facility or something like it may be available already, but I have never heard of it. Perhaps the BBC could have a single, well-publicised address and phone number for programming suggestions.

### News

The BBC's news coverage is the area that has lost most ground in recent years.

- The news is becoming "tabloid-like" in tone, whereas to provide a useful public service it should be "broadsheet".
- Factual errors and unjustified inferences are getting into the news, particularly the television news.
- The bulletins are becoming almost indistinguishable in tone, particularly on the radio. The same type of coverage appears all day, using the same words to cover the same stories. Even the feature content follows the same pattern - attempts to elicit "killer quotes" when often more interest and information could be obtained by allowing the interviewees to talk at length in their own words.

In particular, there is a severe shortage of analysis and context. Therefore I would suggest splitting the news programmes into four strands:

1. Bulletin - an authoritative presentation of the developments of the last 24 hours. This would be used for the whole of one news programme on each network per day, with a five-minute version at the beginning of other news programmes.
2. Raw news - a blend of investigative journalism and interviews with relevant people. Some licence would be given to its presenters to try to "make news", and

presentation of rumour and the odd factual error would not be frowned upon provided it was "cleared up" when its presence was noted.

3. Commentary - the views of experts on the current news. (Experts would include both senior journalists such as John Simpson and Andrew Marr, and outside experts such as academics.)

4. Background - a wider view of the events, giving both the historical and the world-wide context.

So for example, consider a vote in the House of Commons expected to be close. On Radio 4, I would suggest the following coverage:

- Today ("raw news") - interviews with the Whips of the parties and MPs;
- The World at One/This Weekend ("commentary") Andrew Marr's views on how the vote might go;
- the 6 o'clock news ("bulletin") the known facts on the vote and a short presentation of the alternatives;
- The World Tonight ("background") information about previous votes on this subject or previous close votes and how the subject had been treated abroad.

Other networks could be arranged in a similar way - preferably not with the same type of programme at the same time.

The four strands would use the same BBC journalism, but not the same *reporting*. It should be understood that some content from one strand cannot be used in others. The investigative reporting on Today is perfectly proper for Today, but it shouldn't migrate unfiltered into the 6 o'clock news. The other strands should be thought of as above unproductive speculation and political argument. This should have the effect of presenting more issues to people instead of personalised politics. (It might even give people a better opinion of politicians if they heard the politicians' utterances translated into grammatical, polite English!)

The news programmes seem to have acquired a rather low opinion of the intelligence of their viewers and listeners. Such features as tiresome bass music, red squares in the corner of the screen indicating the subject of the item (as if we couldn't tell by listening) and a repetition of the headlines after fifteen minutes (as if we can't remember them for a quarter of an hour!) are merely annoying. The shaky formulations (referring to an accused person as if he is already halfway to being convicted, uneven presentation of political arguments) could alter people's perceptions of the situation unjustly, and an editor should ensure that such errors do not get into the bulletin.

Finally, I would like to suggest that more use should be made of the World Service. When I could receive the World Service, I would regularly listen to its news in preference to Radio 4, finding its wider view of the news and careful language a great contrast to the apparent fixation on UK affairs and tabloid-like formulations I often found even on Radio 4. There was some surprise when it was discovered that civil war had resumed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and a series of attempted coups had occurred in Mauritius, and that these events had not got onto the news in the UK. And indeed they hadn't; but the World Service had been covering them in depth. It seems a great pity that most of Britain cannot receive the World Service except via the

Internet. The new programme *The World* on BBC4 looks interesting, but it is a pity it is on digital TV where quite a few people will not see it!

### Suggestions for action

#### For the Government and regulators

- Avoid the appearance of outside interference by refraining from making changes that appear to be punitive.
- Further reduce the BBC's dependence on audience figures by restructuring any grants or subsidy that depend on audiences for its programmes rather than the number of licence-holders. Make it clear that it is not necessary for the BBC to respond to fashion by producing programmes from new genres if they are not inherently good programmes.
- Make the closure of old services such as analogue TV subject to the approval of an independent body working according to the principles set out above.

#### For the BBC

- As such facilities become possible, extend the "Listen Again" service to include the whole previous series or 3-month period of all radio and TV programmes.
- Again as the necessary technology arrives, offer to fill requests for single copies of programmes from the BBC's archives.
- Transmit relevant information with the digital radio signal, to be displayed on the text display.
- Institute and publicise a single address for viewers and listeners to send suggestions for programmes. Explicitly ask for ideas for "soaps" and drama programmes.
- Split the news programmes into a number of strands, using the same set of journalism but presenting the information in very different ways and with different emphases. Encourage more rigour in the main news bulletins. Widen the coverage of the journalism so that more context and background can be presented.
- Make more use of the World Service in the provision of news. Produce at least one non-digital news programme using a balance of stories similar to that of the World Service.

In closing, I should say again that while the suggestions for the BBC are optional and will probably not damage the BBC if they are not carried out (with the possible exception of changes to the news), **failure to carry out the suggestions for the Government and regulators could seriously damage the BBC, reducing it to the status of merely another national broadcaster.** As I have said, for the BBC to continue in its current respected position is in the national and international interest, and I feel it is important for the world that it should be maintained.