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To: BBC Charter Review
Subject: Review of the BBC's Royal Charter (1/1)

Review of the BBC's Royal Charter

'What do you value about the BBC?'

This is an interesting question that will undoubtedly produce many emotive responses. However, where the BBC still holds its main value is by being independent of commercial/advertising pressures and it should also have great independence from parliament.

Key questions

. What do you think of the BBC's contribution to the life of the United Kingdom and to the wider world? Should this change over the next decade and, if so, how?

There are a number of questions being asked here and in my opinion they should not be confused into one single question.

It would be very easy to offer an emotive answer about how the BBC contributes to life in the UK. In my opinion the BBC should do more to help consumers understand the ever-changing world of technology in a way that consumers can understand the information. I don't believe that science programmes which I would re-label as natural history shows do improve the life of the UK. Equally, I do not believe that 'arts' programmes, especially ballet, contribute anything to the life of the UK. However, that is my personal view and not a view that spans even my own household. Therefore, we should be asking a slightly different question; if it were not for the BBC who would offer programming that some would consider contributes to the life of the UK? When you have an honest answer to that question it may be possible to re-visit that which the BBC is doing.

The Wider World raises two issues and they are the continuation of the BBC World Service and the BBC's semi-commercial divisions. I will comment further on the BBC World Service within the appropriate area. However, I will comment on the output, not commercial aspects that are covered later, of TV and Internet services. The BBC's TV services around the world are viewed by so many with total reverence. This also applies to the BBC's on-line services.

Whilst some governments have done much to destroy their international services with some claiming there is no longer a need to offer such services within our global world; even research carried out by our own agencies clearly shows that consumers and especially youngsters do not always have an understanding of that which is believed from the media. This was very evident recently with the Gulf War.

Therefore, with my view being that the BBC and a small number of other UK broadcasters are believed to be trustworthy, the government, whilst not interfering with the operation of the BBC or commercial services, should positively encourage more global services from respected UK broadcasters.

. What value does the BBC add to the wider provision of public service broadcasting?

Again a heavily loaded question that should be re-worded. However, one simple example is that of making its programming available across the entire face of the UK without the need for a subscription card.

Now that the BBC is widely available to those even in remote rural areas, it could be argued that for many the BBC is the only public service broadcaster available - this certainly applies to areas in Wales and Scotland. Whilst accepting this argument it should also be noted that there are some commercial broadcast services that can also be received, especially radio, via digital to such areas. However, none freely from commercial TV.

. How well has the BBC met its purposes over the Charter period? What evidence do we have that the way in which the BBC does this is successful compared to other broadcasters?

Within the term of the BBC Charter, nearly every broadcaster has had to go through significant changes. Consumers now demand more from their entertainment devices and expect that with very limited increases in cost. Therefore, if it is that we base a judgement on consumer cost against services available then any argument other than the BBC has effectively out-performed is not valid.

. What is it about the BBC that makes it unique? How do we make sure that it is distinct from other broadcasters? Are there better ways to deliver some of the contribution that we have traditionally relied on the BBC to provide?

The BBC is unique purely due to its funding line, in that comment I am not referring to the BBC World Service. Removing that funding route will not be of benefit to the BBC and/or broadcasting in general throughout the UK.

The way in which the BBC can remain distinct from other broadcasters is to give it the freedoms, which many are trying to remove, to remain the BBC. There will be further comment on this subject in response to a following question.

If it is that we are to believe recent history, the question should not be "traditionally relied on the BBC", but that which we have relied on the BBC and that which the BBC will deliver in the future.

In this area we only have to look at the delivery of digital television as a whole to see how the BBC has achieved considerably more than others.

Whilst BSkyB has achieved good digital penetration, the move of digital from the ITV companies to a consortium driven by the BBC has seen the rewards this commentator predicted when the original terrestrial digital platform was unfortunately issued to OnDigital. Therefore, with this argument, the BBC has proven it is achieving more than some broadcasters and possibly they should be cleared to provide more content that others fail to deliver effectively.

. How well does the BBC serve the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions? What changes, if any, would you like to see?

If I am to believe the views of consumers, then the BBC is doing more than most TV companies when it comes down to delivering local content. In addition its recent offering that enables consumers to view news from other regions via digital satellite has been

very warmly received.

Where I do have an issue, which is really a budgetary issue, is combining the different mediums into one area. TV, radio and on-line services require very different skills and mind-sets. Therefore, I would like to see less combination areas and more individual services.

. Is the current balance between national, regional and community level programming right?

This question will again produce answers of little value or balance. Those in one area of the country will often argue that London gets more than others. Some will consider that programming without their own local dialect is also considered to be London programming - any interesting view when you consider programmes with lead actors being from, for example, Northern Ireland.

Therefore, this is not logical to ask. Also it should be very much noted that BBC radio provides a massive level of local programming, where-as TV cannot be viewed in the same light.

In the TV area I refer to general entertainment. People who view the BBC often do so purely for entertainment, something to unwind with. The last thing they need is a programme of someone doing brass-rubbings in the local churchyard, as interesting as that may be to some.

Therefore, regional programming has to be balanced with that which consumers want.

Community programming is equally an area that many have experimented with, especially cable companies, and have found this to be of very little value to the community. Therefore, when specifically looking at TV - the BBC is a very good platform for minority interest community programming and via BBC2 it does very well.

. Does current regional and community content reflect the diversity of the regions and communities served, and deliver what you want? If not, what should be

This question again is, I believe, nothing more than a politically correct inclusion. With close ties to both the Turkish and Jewish communities, how much programming is there for those communities? If it you ask those within those communities they accept they are living in the UK which speaks English and it's faith is that of the Christian Church. The BBC have produce an Asian service which is now widely available on DAB, Digital satellite and Freeview for that community. However, the question should be more aligned to that which the BBC should not be doing. If it is you take such a question to a logical conclusion, the expectation of the BBC would be to make programming for every community in the UK. If that were to become the norm would that mean the BBC has to give a predominant programming strand to those who support the BNP?

'How should the BBC adapt to cope with changes in technology and culture?' The first phase of this question, of which there will be more in the following reply, is for government to fund a technology development centre of excellence that possibly could be run by the BBC providing the broadcast quality achievements, if it is funded by government only, are shared with commercial broadcasters. Culture is again a mixed question in my view and other areas of this response cover that question.

Key question

. How should the BBC respond to the development of new technologies and to changing viewing and listening habits?

In conjunction to the above, and if we are to believe research issued by a government agency, one significant block to consumers taking up digital TV is the level of investment needed to have Personal Video Recorders. Whilst I understand the recent BSkyB promotion has produced higher than expected results, that product only suits a segment of the viewing public. There are devices that very small companies could provide to the BBC, which they wouldn't currently be able to do, that would enable consumers to convert their existing VHS recorder into a PVR when combined with a digital TV tuner.

Therefore, the BBC should be in a position, through the charter, to embrace such developments.

Whilst the BBC has already heavily supported both digital television and the digital replacement for FM, I also applaud its contribution to DRM - the replacement for AM radio. The latter will have a dual benefit for both home services and international services.

Changing viewing and listening habits are often confused with new technology. The main factor not to be forgotten is that when we turn on the TV we frankly don't care how it works, providing we are able to access the content needed - in short content is king.

Like others, the BBC has faced a rapid change in the way viewers and listeners act within multi-channel homes. Now we see that that which we label as radio listeners are listening via the TV set, this applies to both Freeview and digital satellite. However, where the BBC has viewed a trend very well is that of consumers using just one device for entertainment within the home environment whilst retaining standard broadcast systems for cars and hand-held portables. Where there is a small link to technology and programming is in areas where the government has not made available frequencies for transmission of Freeview. In reality, the failure to supply capacity for Freeview may well be wasting BBC resources. Each time that consumers have to call Freeview because transmission is not available and/or the more recent trend of community groups now complaining to the BBC because they can't get Freeview holding the incorrect view that they should have a reduction in their license fee, it's not the BBC to blame it is frequency allocation. Therefore, there is a strong argument that those in a position to make frequencies available should be partially funding the cost of fielding such calls.

With regard to on-line services, the BBC are doing much to help acceptance of the service known as broadband - much of that is driven by Children's programming and I understand more educational services will be added soon. Where government should be helping is providing organisations such as the BBC, and others, the tools needed to make on-line services work more efficiently. As I understand it, a massive cost to the BBC would be reduced if someone like OFCOM had a technical team that could field and resolve problems created by SPAM. Whilst I am happy to be proven wrong, I am not aware that OFCOM will be providing such facilities to the BBC or any of its other clients.

'What do you think of the television, radio and online services the BBC provides?'

As per my previous answers - one person's love is another person's hate. If I were in a position to re-allocate resources the first thing I would look very closely at is areas of minority interest 'arts'. This has little value to me and why any budget at all is allocated to such areas is, basically, beyond me. BBC TV 2 provided more than adequate airtime for minority interest arts areas. However, I have to respect that some may find my point of view totally unacceptable.

Unfortunately, as the highest profile for the BBC is still TV - which it really shouldn't be as radio, especially the better-programmed areas such as R2 (that comment is not a personal preference more a commentators point of view), are proving that radio is as important to many as TV. Whilst local BBC radio fights for budget and does a very good service for the sector it focuses on -which few commercial stations target - it does need more to improve on its current position.

If we are to believe recent research, the way more could be achieved by the BBC is if it is those who still fail to buy a TV license were made to do so. This should be a government-funded initiative that would only need short term funding lines. Once those not paying the license fee were aware that the government is not accepting people breaking the law in such a fashion, the level of income to the BBC would increase and the level of funding from central government could decrease.

Key questions

. What do you think of the publicly-funded services provided by the BBC, on television, radio and online? What changes, if any, would you like to see?

Much of this I have already answered and much of the changes I would like to see would be more independence for the BBC

. How well do the BBC's publicly-funded services deliver its core purposes?

Again that is a question that will produce emotive answers. For homes that do not have Children I would expect them not to see huge value in kids services. However, at my home, my children will mix there TV viewing between the BBC, Turner and Discovery owned channels. They see no value at all in news services at their age nor would I expect them to. And may I remind you that in terms of schools and education the BBC is seen by many as the preferred on-line content provider.

In terms of radio the had the BBC retained purely a DAB distribution delivery of the new radio stations I may have held the view that it had not been successful. However, now those services are freely available on Freeview and more importantly digital satellite without the need for subscription. The later means that for around the same cost as a good radio tuner consumers now have BBC radio and the added benefit of many digital TV services.

. In what way should the BBC's services differ from those of commercial public service broadcasters and other purely commercial broadcasters in order to add value? To what extent should the BBC provide 'something for everyone'?

Again this is repetition. However, the BBC and commercial broadcasters all have very differing needs. In my submission to a previous consultation, I clearly stated that the best route to enable all sectors to provide the best that they can it will require specialised regulators. And this should still be the case. Radio, TV and the Internet all need knowledgeable regulators and technical assistance to those regulators.

The only possibility for the BBC is retain the value added it currently has is not to confuse it with other broadcast sectors and to retain its Royal Charter.

The BBC cannot provide something for everyone. What we would end up with is a station for 36 year old male, single parent, 5'6" people, who own a poodle. There would be a second station for the same group aged 37 - it is purely not possible.

There has to be logic to broadcasting and therefore something for everyone could mean that because X-amount here me on the radio or read a column of mine then a certain percentage of all groups are catered for. In my case that would be true. However, it should not be confused with watering down so as to pander to the flights and fancies of a lobby group who happen to be shouting the loudest - in my experience that loud group are often a very small minority. Therefore, to answer this question look to those that have good experience in providing programming that can appeal to wide audiences. Again I'm sorry that the answer will be, in reality, you cannot please all of the people all of the time.

'Should the BBC run commercial services?'

Yet another non-specific question and therefore not one I will answer in one. To begin with I will look at the international services - not the BBC World Service. In terms of BBC enterprises and channels that generate revenue from non-license fee payers, I have no issue with the BBC making sensible business decisions. If it is that those companies, as is the case from many, produce a return that effectively keeps the license fee lower then I applaud those generating the revenue and would like to see government positively encouraging the BBC to continue and expand such services.

In terms of having to accept content from sources that may carry some form of sponsorship tag-line, I do have reserved judgement. However, providing the reason for the sponsorship is for the event and not just because the BBC is carrying said event I do not have a problem with that.

There are many examples of when sponsored events are shown on the BBC and have been for many years. A prime example is that of Premier League Football. It seems very obvious to me that there is no objection to the clubs carrying sponsor details and being shown on BBC TV.

I think the BBC have gone some way to explaining that they are not the only group to offer magazines to consumers and now they carry an advisory note I find that acceptable.

By definition it could be argued that Freeview is a commercial service - I hold the view that you cannot define Freeview in such a simple way. Therefore, the BBC's involvement in Freeview is one thing I am very comfortable with and I trust government will be complementing the BBC on the way in which it has motivated both viewers and listeners to switch to digital reception.

Key questions

. Do you think the BBC should continue to run commercial services alongside its licence fee-funded services?

There is good merit in such activities, subject to conditions in response to a question following, especially if the revenue generated is used to the benefit of the license fee payer - that could be more programming or more services.

. If the BBC should continue to run commercial services, how should we ensure that the relationship between the public and commercial services is fair to the BBC's commercial competitors?

A loaded question again. Are we discussing BBC America or BBC Home Services. If it is the BBC can generate revenue from a service in the USA and viewers here benefit I see no issue with that. If we are speaking about commercial home services then we need to look at each sector. At present there is an issue for some with regard to print media. Some have argued that the BBC has an unfair position in that sector. However, whilst there is no real regulator, the PPP is not a regulator and no responsibility to anyone, it is difficult to see how any form of level playing field can be achieved. Those who wish to start a magazine title will doubtless have endless stories of how difficult that process is due to claims of unfair practise by existing commercial players in the market. The later comment can equally be taken in two ways.

. Should there be any limits on what the BBC is allowed to do commercially and, if so, what should those limits
Most definitely. The BBC TV and radio outlets should not and should never be encouraged to take advertising in the way home commercial stations do. I will refer back this in an up/coming question. To actually ask such a question, with the very greatest of respect, shows a clear lack of understanding of the media in the UK.

'How should we pay for the BBC?'

Key questions

. Does the licence fee remain the best way to pay for the BBC's public services?

Yes

. If not, what alternatives would you like to see explored?

None

. Does the BBC deliver value for money?

Yes, to some and no to others, but as I have stated before you cannot please all the people all of the time.

. Does a grant-in-aid via the Foreign and Commonwealth Office remain the best way to pay for BBC World Service?

Yes. The BBC World Service should be funded by grant, pre-supposing the government has any form of interest in sharing up to the minute news as well as providing entertainment and education to the many disenfranchised areas of the world that still exist. Attempting to fund this service from the license fee would prove unacceptable to license payers - therefore, the BBC World Service has and should remain funded by the F.C.O.

'Is the BBC organised in the most effective and efficient way?'

Is Whitehall organised in the most effective and efficient way? That is an answer we will never get, yet we are asking if the BBC

has an organisation and team that are all performing to 101% on a daily basis. Any business management consultant will share a simple fact; we get can most of the way there and yet utopia is still a way off.

The BBC has improved in the last few years - I hope that improvement isn't used as a disguise for cutting programming budgets.

Key questions

. How should the BBC be organised to deliver its functions and services? Should it continue to operate as a single organisation?

Those that wish to see the break up of the BBC are those that fear what an independent group such as the BBC can offer the general public. In recent times the BBC has made areas very accountable and whilst some would see that in a negative light, the reality is that from existing budgets the corporation has produced more for consumers - in the main.

Therefore, the corporation should be retained under Royal Charter.

. Does the BBC broadcast the right balance of independently produced and in-house productions?

If either the in-house or independently produced programming is not of suitable quality than who ever is continuing to make such material should not be afforded the luxury of continuing to make such material. On the other hand if it is that the material is of suitable quality then they should continue. Whilst I fully understand the concerns of some, the balance of independent to in-house should not be the question, it is the quality of the programming that is critical/

- How important is it that the BBC makes programmes as well as commissioning them?

As has been seen in several sectors, the BBC has this inbuilt ability to make certain types of programming better than others.

Therefore, on that basis it should continue to make in-house programming.

. How should we ensure that the BBC continues to foster world-class broadcasting talent?

That is impossible to categorise in such a question. If it is that, for example, we have a number of years where the world-class talent is born in Manchester or alternatively Glasgow or Cardiff then there will be some who claim the BBC is not fostering world-class talent, as it isn't arriving from London.

Equally if there are lean years when for what ever reason there is not an emerging level of new talent that problem should not be

directed to the BBC it has more merit in being directed at those charged with looking for such talent at early ages. Those people

are a combination of parents, schools and government support.

Also we need to note that not every talented person will suit the BBC, for that matter some talent doesn't work on TV where as he/she can do radio.

'How should the BBC be governed and regulated?'

The Royal Charter is the only way forward and that has to be inclusive of the existing governors. Regulating the BBC is actually a term that many use again because they are afraid of allowing the BBC to retain its independence. More in the following question/ replies.

Key questions

. Do you think that, in the regulation of the BBC, there is the right balance between the Governors and Ofcom?

I have never considered that the BBC should be regulated by OFCOM - as previously stated the BBC and commercial sectors have very different needs.

. Does a Royal Charter continue to be the most appropriate basis for the establishment of the BBC?

Yes

'How do we ensure that the BBC is properly accountable to the public and Parliament?'

That is a very difficult question to answer. My first point is that it should NEVER be accountable to a political party purely because that party is the custodian of parliament for a term or terms of four years. There is a good argument that public accountability should be via an all-party commons select committee. However, again, only if that committee has cross-party support.

Key question

. Is the BBC sufficiently responsive to its viewers and listeners and to Parliament? What improvements, if any, could the BBC make?

As I have just started, why should we even contemplate parliament being in a position to change the BBC from a license fee funded service into a service funded by commercial airtime sales. Only to find that some time in the future a new party becomes the custodian of parliament and reverts the previous decision.

There is a good argument to encourage expansion of the groups, which acted as listener or viewer groups in the past at local level. However, for such groups to have any chance of being successful they should not be predominately from any demographic or age group.

With any corporation there has to be a cut-off point at which the customers can do no more. I would hate to think that the minority interest radio station I depicted earlier would all have representative would had a right to meet with the BBC Director General to ensure there station was launched. Such actions are totally unmanageable and not acceptable.

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