



ACACIA Productions Ltd

## **BBC Charter Renewal Consultation**

Comments in relation to the BBC Charter Renewal

By Edward Milner,

In requesting feedback ahead of the Charter Renewal, DCMS has suggested eight 'Key Questions', which are published in their leaflet 'YOUR BBC YOUR SAY'. Unfortunately while most of the eight depend on a number of other prior questions, which DCMS does not ask. In my view, without answers to these prior questions it is not possible to give coherent answers to the DCMS questions. I have therefore addressed the following set of questions.

- 1. What are the purposes of Public Service Broadcasting?**
- 2. What is the multi-channel context?**
- 3. What is the role of a Public Service Broadcaster, and what should the programming priorities be?**
- 4. How can we ensure that it keeps to these priorities? In other words how should the BBC be governed?**
- 5. How should the BBC be funded?**

Much of this debate was explored in connection with the Communications Act, with the same Secretary of State. In particular this respondent wrote several times (without success) requesting that the first of the questions above should be addressed in detail in that Act. In the case of BBC Charter renewal it seems perverse to proceed without addressing it.

### **1. What are the purposes of Public Service Broadcasting?**

As the prime example of Public Service Broadcasting (I have used PSB as shorthand for Public Service Broadcasting and for Public Service Broadcaster), the purposes and role of the BBC must be a fundamental matter of serious consideration in relation to the Charter renewal. In spite of considerable input from many sources the Government chose not to attempt any definition or even some principles in the recent Communications Act. There are definitions available, and much thinking has been done on the subject of PSB by bodies such as the European Broadcasting Union and the Council of Europe. Strengthening and widening democracy could well be the first major objective. Reflecting and supporting the quality and diversity of culture in the society at local, regional, national, European and global levels should perhaps be the second. There may well be others that should be included, but I suggest these as the two fundamental ones.

## **2. What are some of the relevant aspects of the multi-channel context?**

There are constant references made both within the BBC and by outside observers that the BBC operates in an increasingly fragmented and competitive broadcasting environment. This is self-evidently true but what are the implications?

Is the idea of a common experience to be provided by a major terrestrial broadcaster no longer applicable? I would suggest that major sporting occasions (the ones 'protected' by the Government) and certain reality TV and pop-singer competitive shows all come into this category, which is clearly far from dead. Unfortunately there is very little serious programming which does achieve this, although very occasionally individual programmes such as *The Secret Policeman* occasionally achieve it. *Panorama* is now so marginalized that it hardly achieves this any more.

As for competition, this area must be looked at with care and reflection. What have been the effects of recent Acts, in particular the 1992 Broadcasting Act, if not to force the BBC to compete more directly with other channels, becoming more commercial and ratings-chasing as a result? There have been many complaints about dumbing down and this has now even reached BBC Publications (see the resignation of the Editor of *BBC Wildlife*). Is this what a PSB should be doing? What is the point of the BBC duplicating much of the programming which is provided perfectly adequately by commercial channels? The relevant competition is perhaps international, and there the BBC now fails to compete in most categories of serious programming.

## **3. What is the role of a Public Service Broadcaster, and what should its programming priorities be?**

### **Current trends in BBC television**

Even Jane Root, Controller of the most popular and the most populist channel has recently conceded that immediate audience figures should not be the only measure of a programme's worth. Should a PSB strive to be popular? There are voices (mostly from comfortable positions in commercial television) whose concerns about the health or otherwise of a PSB should be treated with caution, who claim that the BBC must entertain the largest possible audience, every time. To accept this is to accept the philosophy of the tabloid press, without remembering that for them selling newspapers has accepts virtually no standards or constraints. And this view is often backed up by the claim that the Reithian ideas about dispensing high culture are now out of date. Richard Eyre in his *Guardian* article of February 14 refers to the Reithian "Land of Oz", but demographers know that the British public has never been as well educated before. But ironically because of this erosion of Public Service Broadcasting (from which, repeated surveys show, the public actually gets most of its information about the world) the public

may be well educated but less and less well informed. For example, knowledge of the rest of the world is significantly less than it was ten years ago; it is no coincidence that coverage of international issues on all channels has dropped alarmingly during this period (monitored by Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project).

Demographers also know that the audience is ageing, yet terrestrial television channels including BBC constantly stress the need to cater for the younger audience, yet at the same time children's programming is narrow and limited. The audience as a whole is ageing and taking licence-fee payers alone it is even older. Ignoring all this, the popularisers' voices have been echoed and indeed acted upon by senior executives such as the two current Channel Controllers, who have discarded all "minority" programmes entirely or moved them out of sight onto digital channels. The result has been quite deliberately programming for the lowest common denominator. The immediate audience figures have been the only measure that counts. If this short-sighted approach had been used in the past, almost every successful genre would have been stillborn, all the best comedies would have died before they got started, and we would not have natural history, costume drama, children's programmes, probably not even the news or current affairs.

There used to be a Barb score called an AI (Audience Appreciation Index), but this has been deliberately discarded by the BBC for the last few years, possibly because too many programmes had such a low score they were undetectable? I would suggest you reinstate this so that you can gauge some idea of quality of a programme as well as quantity of audience. Another measure you might consider would be what I would call the Repeatability Index: could a programme be repeated for any other reason than as a schedule-filler? A question along these lines might be included when reactions to programmes are sought.

In the last few years I believe the BBC has mislaid its purpose. There seems to have been a simplification and a coarsening of the entire output that I for one regret. Simplification of difficult subjects (aside from ignoring them altogether) is not the only approach possible, even for television. Even history and science are now regularly simplified (even bowdlerised) for public consumption with the explosion of speculative and presenter-led one-dimensional programming. The current slogan for what used to be a highly respected programme 'Horizon' (which I myself worked on some years ago) is now something like 'pure science – sheer drama' which is a recipe for hyping up topics, engaging in computer-animation speculation and generally overdramatising the subject – and the programmes generally reflect this. The programme has moved downmarket and may well have gained new viewers at the expense of losing many others. Far too many urgent topics are never tackled at all now as they are perceived to be too boring: conflicts over big dams, flood control and river management, alternative energy, the crisis of world fish stocks, desertification, the future of the Amazon and indeed all tropical forests, are just a few topics which are generally ignored but should be well to the fore.

But television should aspire to more than this. The skill of the producer is to make difficult or complex ideas comprehensible, not by simplifying, but by taking time and care to produce imaginative and fully-researched documentaries often including conflicting views, the stimulating and penetrating dramas, the hilarious and cutting satires. The skills involved in making such programmes have virtually been lost; experienced documentary producers for example are now all out of work, in retirement or in other professions; rebuilding would take time, money and commitment, but it could be done. And if you think this is harking back to a golden age, have a look at the sorts of documentaries that are flowering on foreign television channels and winning many of the international prizes that BBC and other British broadcasters' used to win. It goes without saying that none of these documentaries are currently available to a British audience.

If we can get grown-up radio on Radio 4 and the World Service, what about grown up television? Can we not aspire to this from the BBC, whatever nonsensical shows appear on ITV or Channel Four produce? Do we have to subscribe to the voyeuristic and celebrity-obsessed agenda of the commercial stations in everything including the news? To strengthen democracy what is needed is a well-informed and interested public; as access to higher education widens surely we can aspire to a higher level of public debate and decision-making? If so what more worthwhile objective could there be for Public Service Broadcasting?

### **Programming priorities for the BBC as a major PSB**

Taking the output of BBC radio, including BBC World Service which is (a) listened to by a substantial home audience and (b) offers very much a PSB diet for listeners anyway, I feel there is a fair mix of programming including both intellectually challenging programmes, programmes for many overlapping minorities (jazz fans, disabled listeners, asian listeners, fishing enthusiasts, classical music scholars, etc.) performance and an excellent coverage of both domestic issues (albeit the political and current affairs coverage often seems too Westminster-oriented, even Westminster-obsessed) and international events, cultures and debates. There are arguments over the precise roles of Radios 1 and 2, the value of some digital channels etc., but the general tenor of the output seems to me to meet the two main objectives of a major PSB as suggested in section 1 above. It is taken as read that the full diverse range of programmes is made available on a single channel for the general listener.

This is not the case with television, where the output has narrowed alarmingly in recent years; virtually any programme with any intellectual content has been hived off to digital channels and effectively ghettoized. Is it coincidence that both Channel Controllers have recently tried to distance themselves from the ratings obsession with which both are inextricably linked?

On the two main terrestrial channels several genres are now over-represented: soaps (and in particular what might be termed 'contentless' soaps, from which I would

exclude the radio Archers), **makeovers and property programmes, comedy programmes based largely on one or two main characters being particularly stupid, reality/pop music shows, quiz programmes and celebrity-obsessed programmes** of various sorts. There is perhaps a place for some programmes in most of these genres in genuine PSB output, but it should be only very limited, they are not the natural stuff of PBS broadcasting. In other words **there are far too many of these programmes which have replaced serious programming in the schedules.** In other words there is no longer a proper balance, especially in peak-hour viewing times. It is quite inadequate to have whole genres only on minority channels; they should be an integral part of the diet for the general viewer.

It has been too easy for other genres to be removed, and I suggest that there should in future be guideline minimums or quotas (per week) below which the BBC should not drop for the following categories or genres:

- (1) Documentaries (and by this I mean a diversity of different types including authored documentaries, but not extended news reports of the 'Correspondent' type) both 'one-offs' and strands/series, including international documentaries at both peak hour and off-peak times.
- (2) Contemporary (commissioned) drama, including drama for children, reflecting the cultural diversity of Britain (and the world) today.
- (3) Quality films including world cinema and foreign documentaries.
- (4) Arts programming including more, and more diverse performance programmes, documentaries, news and discussion/interpretation.
- (5) Current affairs programmes of greater diversity than at present, including more aimed at the youth audience, and including satire.

The first of these I am particularly concerned about; by constantly having a wide range of quality documentaries the public can keep itself better informed about matters at home and those abroad; these would foster better international understanding, better acceptance of minorities here, better understanding and perhaps anticipation of world events informing issues from terrorist atrocities to tragedies such as the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers, the dead migrants in the lorry at Dover etc, etc. There has been a tendency in recent years for major news stories to break about issues or in countries with which television viewers would be wholly unfamiliar; once a country has a name for something there is a great reluctance to show anything that does not confirm the stereotype: Afghanistan is backward, Islamic and violent, Haiti is violent and lawless, Thailand is a country of drugs and prostitutes, Colombia is a land of drug barons and kidnaps, and so on. I personally can think of no programmes at all on BBC which in any way challenged these stereotypes in the past few years. The phenomenon of news events 'taking the viewer by surprise' could be reduced, and more informed comment and reaction elicited

if a much wider range of topics were covered regularly in reasonably accessible ways. Commercial television will not do this sort of thing; it is exactly what PSB is for.

**4. How can we ensure that it keeps to these priorities? In other words how should the BBC be governed?**

and

**5. How should the BBC be funded?**

These issues are to my mind irrevocably inter-related. I am strongly in favour of the licence fee as the best practicable method of funding the BBC, but I feel that the Board of Governors needs reforming. I would like to suggest that licence-fee payers should have a voice and representation on the board. Licence-fee payers should choose some of the governors to represent their interests; perhaps a proportion (say 40%) of the Governors should be chosen by a direct vote of all licence-fee payers. A voting paper could be sent out with each licence certificate, say every 3 or every 5 years. The chairman of the Governors should not be appointed by the Government but elected by the Governors themselves.

In the recent Communications Act, the Government was at pains to require that the audience is protected from material it (the audience) finds distasteful; gratuitous and extreme violence, sex, bad language. What concerned many licence-fee payers more perhaps is that their reasonable expectation of a diverse range of quality programming is constantly unmet. In other words the bad is restricted to some extent, but the good is not promoted. Through the Governors, I feel licence-fee payers should be able to have some influence and raise their concerns about quality of the overall output.

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