



Submission to the review of the BBC's Royal Charter 'A strong BBC, independent of government'

May 2005

BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development) is the United Kingdom's broadest network of voluntary sector organisations working in international development and development education. BOND has over 290 members and is officially recognised by the Department for International Development (DfID).

Our members are united in recognising the need to develop an informed and active constituency in support of international development in the UK, as affirmed by DfID's two White Papers since 1997.

BOND welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the BBC Green Paper. We are pleased that the government has pledged their support for a strong, independent BBC. The overall focus of our submission is on the international issues that are of concern to our members. We have responded to most of the consultation questions, but not all of them.

Question 1: Do you think it is helpful to define the BBC's purposes in this way?

Yes. BOND has long supported the call by the voluntary sector Public Voice coalition for a set of core purposes to be enshrined in the next agreement between the BBC and the DCMS.

Question 2: Are these the right purposes?

Yes. These purposes are clearly linked to progressive areas of public policy and legitimate the social role of the BBC as an institution that meets the civic, cultural and educational needs that the market will not serve.

BOND welcomes without reservation the reworded fifth purpose on "bringing the world to the UK and the UK to the world". In the wider context across the commercial communications sector of falling levels of in-depth programming on developing countries, this purpose promotes a reinvigorated internationalism that can inform UK citizens about the issues, cultures and viewpoints of the wider world.

BOND believes that the BBC remains the best way of providing high quality, diverse information about developing countries in the UK. As such we would support an overarching purpose for the BBC – going beyond the old mission in previous Charter agreements to "inform, educate and entertain" – that would enshrine the BBC as an institution explicitly serving the information needs of *citizens*.

The BBC would then be working within the same public policy framework as the rest of the communications sector – for which Ofcom has the twin principle duties laid down in the

Communications Act 2003 to further the interests of both citizens and consumers. In this framework the BBC would then be distinguished by its dedication to the interests of citizens rather than consumers.

Question 3: Are these the right characteristics?

Yes, but while there is little to disagree with in this list of characteristics, BOND would also like to see the inclusion of 'participation' as well.

Whether the BBC is providing information about local communities or the global world to UK citizens, it is vital that the BBC facilitate the participation of citizens in contributing to their communities and engaging in active learning.

The BBC itself has expressed the desirability of engaging the public not just as "passive audiences" but as "active, inspired participants". As emerging digital technologies further change the relationship between audiences and the media, participation will be an essential element for achieving the other five purposes.

Question 4: Do you agree that the BBC should be at the forefront of developments in technology, including digital television?

Yes, but with reservations around schemes to help "vulnerable people" switch to digital TV. The responsibility for helping such users lies with the government, rather than the BBC. Licence fee income is given by UK citizens to the run the BBC. It should not be diverted to pay for social welfare and infrastructure development, which is the responsibility of government.

Question 5: Do you support the proposal for a further review of alternative funding methods, before the end of the next Charter period?

Question 6: Do you have a view on any aspect of the operation of the licence fee: concessions, its collection or its enforcement?

It does not seem appropriate given that the public consultation of 2004 and various pieces of government research commissioned in the last two years have repeatedly concluded that the licence fee remains the best model for funding the BBC.

Question 7: Have we defined the roles of the BBC Trust and the Executive Board sufficiently clearly?

BOND agrees with the proposed division of roles.

Question 8: Is this the right way to define the public interest remit of the BBC Trust?

In defining how the BBC Trust ensures that the BBC "fulfils its public purposes", BOND supports the contention of the Public Voice coalition that it is inappropriate for the public interest remit of the Trust to include making sure that the BBC "doesn't unfairly or unduly damage commercial media businesses".

As a public service broadcaster, the BBC should exist primarily to serve the interests of informed UK citizens. The impact that the BBC has on the commercial media sector is an issue that should be considered where relevant, but it is not an issue that should be

accorded equal weight with the BBC's primary public purpose of serving its citizens. Regardless of the insistence of a well-funded and vocal commercial lobby, such concerns should not drive decision-making on the BBC's purposes until there is convincing evidence of the unfair damage that the BBC supposedly inflicts. Despite energetic attempts to uncover it, such evidence has yet to be produced.

Question 9: How many of these options would you like to see adopted in the Trust's statement of promises? Are there any other options that you would like to see considered?

BOND supports the call from the Public Voice coalition the BBC Trust to also adopt a 'plain English' Agreement that is comprehensible to lay understanding and a joint scrutiny committee of both Houses of Parliament to examine future Charter review papers.

Question 10: Have you any views about how the BBC Trust should handle complaints?

Question 11: How many members do you think the BBC Trust needs?

Question 12: What skills and expertise do you think they need?

Question 13: Are there any particular communities or interest groups that you think the Trust members should represent?

BOND and its member organisations would argue that the BBC Trust needs to have the expertise to effectively oversee the BBC's new international purpose.

Question 14: Do you think a 'window of creative competition' can be made to work? If not, would you support a raised quota for independent production in BBC television?

Question 15: Do you think a voluntary 10% quota for radio is sufficient? Or should the quota be increased or made mandatory?

A raised quota for independent production in BBC television will not in itself necessarily improve the range or type of programming on offer. Commissioning and scheduling policies are key, and in fact, independent producers will be less well placed to resist weak commissioning than in-house staff.

Question 16: Do you agree that the BBC should be able to propose changes to its range of services over the course of the next ten years?

Yes.

Question 17: Do you agree with our proposals for handling new services?

Yes, but once again BOND opposes the significance accorded to the market impact assessment. The public value of a change in services is the primary concern – whether there is an adverse market impact should be a secondary consideration.

Conclusion

BOND sees a strong, publicly accountable BBC delivering television, radio and online services as vital for the citizens of an international, globalised world. The BBC can meet needs that the market will not serve, relating to the public as citizens rather than consumers and operating according to civic, cultural and educational needs rather than by the bottom lines of the private sector. If the UK is to progress and prosper, it is important that its citizens are empowered with the means to engage fully with the wider world.