

5 The BBC today

“What do you value about the BBC?”

Key findings

- The public values the BBC across a wide range of areas. It has an overall satisfaction rating from quantitative research of 75%
- However, most people say they have things they would like to see change
- And there is a small but significant minority who value the BBC very little, if at all
- There was a marked, but not universal perception in focus groups and consultation responses that BBC programmes have declined in quality – although it was balanced in opinion surveys by those who saw improvements

The majority of the public value the BBC...

- 5.1 The range of views that people have about the BBC is very wide. At one end of the spectrum are those who really love it and have nothing bad to say about it. For those who are positive about the BBC overall – and amongst the respondents to the public consultation this was a strong majority – the BBC is a public institution of considerable value. 72% of participants in

“I value the coverage that the BBC provides, its applicability to the life of the nation and across the world. I value its authority and its ability to speak to and for others. I value its diligence in the research and treatment of issues which I recognise as important even if they are not of particular interest to me. I value its store of knowledge and information in this information-led world.”

South East Older People’s Advisory Group (consultation response)

quantitative research told us they would miss the BBC if it wasn’t there. Furthermore, a recurrent concern amongst respondents was that the process of Charter Review itself might result in unnecessary and potentially harmful changes to the BBC.

- 5.2 And a clear finding of our qualitative and deliberative research was that individuals began to value the BBC more after they had investigated and understood the full range of services provided by the Corporation.
- 5.3 At the other end of the spectrum are those – a significant minority – who see very little value in the BBC at all, and often hold very negative views indeed. For example, of those responses where it was possible to determine the respondent’s degree of satisfaction with the BBC (67% of the total), 16% expressed dissatisfaction.

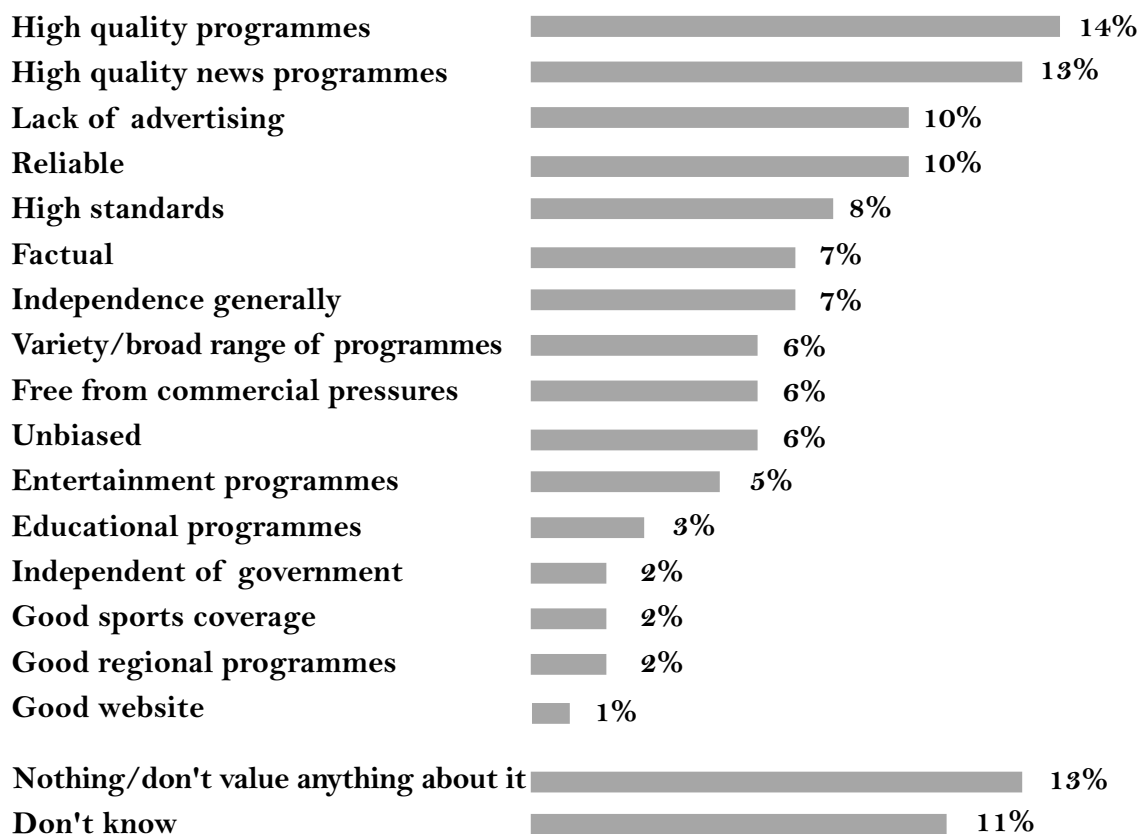
“There seems to be this mystique that foreigners may have about the BBC, that it was this fine, upstanding, British...but it’s not, it’s a bloody dinosaur.”

Participant in qualitative research, AB, 31-45, light TV watchers, Northern England

5.4 But our research and consultation is very clear that for most people, the BBC is an important and valuable part of their daily lives. 84% of consultation respondents who expressed their level of satisfaction with the BBC and 75% of participants in our quantitative research reported overall satisfaction with the BBC and its services.

Spontaneous good points

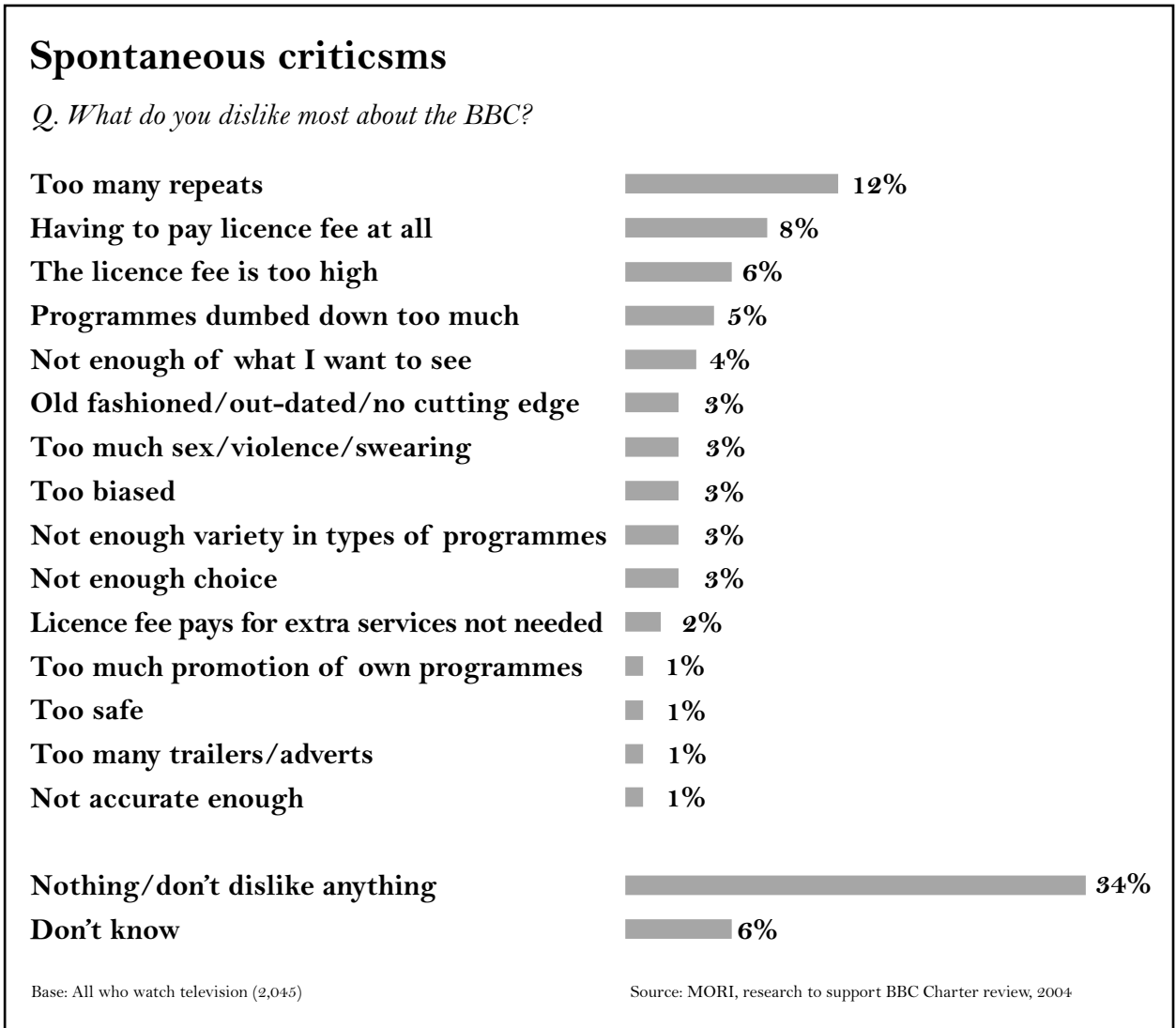
Q. Thinking about the BBC in general, what do you personally value most about the BBC?



Base: All respondents (2,068)

Source: MORI, research to support BBC Charter review, 2004

5.5 Nevertheless, some aspects of the BBC give rise to varying degrees of concern. 47% of respondents to public consultation who expressed their level of satisfaction said that they were satisfied with the BBC and its services but saw room for improvement. At the same time, a conclusion to be drawn from public consultation is that more appears to be expected from the BBC than from other broadcasters. Respondents' answers imply that expectations are raised by a combination of the BBC's existing reputation and the fact that it is funded through a universal and compulsory fee.



...for reasons that include impartiality, and independence – on a range of fronts...

5.6 Our quantitative research shows that, while the BBC leads other public service broadcasters in perceptions of impartiality and accuracy, independence from Government generally appears to be a quality shared by ITV, Channel 4 and Five. When asked specifically whether the BBC was independent of Government, public opinion was split, with 42% agreeing, and 39% disagreeing. “Independence generally” and “independence of Government” feature in people’s image of the BBC – although they trailed behind the main spontaneous values attributed to BBC – high quality programming, lack of advertising and reliability.

“I think people tend to believe what they see on BBC...We’re paying for it so you assume it is totally impartial. Giving you the news with no slant to it...You can’t please all the people all the time, but I think they generally get it right.”

Participant in qualitative research, C1, 46-60, light TV watchers, Scotland

...particularly freedom from commercial pressures...

5.7 Our research and consultation generated a clear public consensus that one of the most valuable aspects of the BBC is the fact that its television and radio programmes are not broken up by advertisements. ‘Lack of advertising’ was in the top three qualities of the BBC praised by the public, coming just behind high quality programmes and high quality news programmes. This was echoed by some of the children and young people who responded to the consultation.

5.8 However, the amount of time the BBC spends promoting its own programmes – for instance by showing trailers in the breaks between programmes – was a source of concern raised in consultation. About a third (35%) of participants in our quantitative research agreed with the statement that the BBC advertises its own programmes too much, and “too much promotion of own programmes” featured in spontaneous criticism of the BBC.

Public Service Broadcasters		
The public service broadcasters in the United Kingdom are:		
The BBC	ITV	Channel 4
Channel 5	S4C	Teletext

5.9 One of the reasons given for the BBC to be valued is because its funding arrangements – through the licence fee – are seen as enabling it to take risks in a way that other differently-funded broadcasters might find more difficult. However, only 13% of participants in our quantitative research saw the BBC as ‘cutting edge’ compared to, for example, 23% for Channel 4.

...and, for the majority, setting standards.

5.10 The phrases ‘envy of the world’ and ‘national treasure’ frequently appeared in public responses. From consultation and research, the majority see the BBC as having a particular role in setting the standard for others to follow, both domestically and on the international stage and in a range of areas – from creative leadership to training and diversity.

5.11 However, there is a significant minority that take a very different view – they perceive the BBC, in the words of one respondent, to be “pitching output to a lowest common denominator” and that, although standards might be, in the opinion of these respondents, above those of other broadcasters, they are not what they think should be expected of the BBC.

<p>“The BBC has acquired a reputation for excellence in public service broadcasting throughout the world. In the United Kingdom it has been described as the ‘cornerstone’ of public service broadcasting; the standard by which other broadcasters are assessed.”</p> <p>P Tomlinson, consultation respondent</p>

They also value its role in learning...

5.12 There is a clear majority view from all of our public consultation and research that one of the BBC’s most important roles is to contribute to learning – not just through its services aimed directly at students and teachers but also through programmes like nature documentaries, which participants in our public consultation and all forms of research told us set the BBC apart from other broadcasters. 53% of participants in our quantitative research said they watched documentaries, and 24% said they would like to see more documentary programmes, higher than any other type of programme.

- 5.13 47% of participants in our quantitative research thought that the description “educational” applied to the BBC – considerably more than did so for other public service broadcasters. And responses to public consultation contained much praise of the BBC’s educational role.

“I see them as doing that [providing educational output], not in terms of the television but in terms of their education packs and their web site...for teachers, it’s known to be a good site. Look on the BBC site for whatever you’re doing and you’ll find something.”

Participant in qualitative research, primary school teacher, Northern England

- 5.14 Its contribution is seen to extend across all age groups and profiles, although it is seen as having a particularly important role in the educational, social and cultural development of children and young people.

...its contribution to ‘informed democracy’...

- 5.15 It was very clear from consultation and all strands of research that for the British public there is a strong association between the BBC and the functioning of democracy in the UK. Our quantitative research shows it to have the strongest association of all public service broadcasters with accuracy and trustworthiness. 85% of participants in quantitative research agreed with the statement that “the BBC has an important role in keeping the public informed about what is going on in the UK”.
- 5.16 Many respondents cited the unique nature of the BBC as a publicly funded yet autonomous broadcaster, as affording it a key role in the promotion of global democracy.
- 5.17 One of the most frequently given answers in the public consultation to the question of what respondents valued about the BBC was the BBC’s news service – about a third of respondents to the consultation made reference to BBC news coverage. ‘High quality news programmes’ was the second most frequently cited of the BBC’s ‘good points’ in quantitative research, and it stands out from other public service broadcasters in this respect.
- 5.18 On balance, the BBC has a reputation amongst the UK public for reliable, accurate and impartial news reporting. That said, few people claimed that other news services (especially ITN, Channel 4 News and Sky News) were less impartial than the BBC – a finding backed up by our quantitative research. For 62% of participants in quantitative research, the BBC provides the ‘best news and current affairs about Britain and the world’ of the main broadcasters. However, only 55% of participants in quantitative research agreed with the statement, “the BBC only broadcasts accurate and true information”.
- 5.19 It would appear that for most, the events related to the Hutton Inquiry have had little impact on trust in the accuracy and impartiality of BBC news – on the whole, there was no strong sense from people who took part in consultation and research that the findings of Lord Hutton had impacted significantly on people’s views. According to our qualitative research – much of which took place around the date of the Hutton Inquiry report’s publication – a “handful” of people had changed their views in its wake.

- 5.20 A clear message from public consultation was that impartiality, accuracy and balance are seen as paramount to the success of the BBC's news provision. The BBC's news programming was highly respected by many consultation respondents and considered impressively comprehensive, reliably accurate and impartial, and appreciated for the range of its coverage. The children and young people we consulted also had something to say about news – *Newsround* was cited by some children as being better and less boring than news their parents watched.
- 5.21 However, we also received many complaints about what some people perceived to be bias on the part of the BBC on a number of different issues. The BBC was often perceived to have its own agenda – although the nature of that agenda appeared to vary with people's individual viewpoints. Of the 33% of consultation respondents who made reference to the BBC's news coverage, 39% thought that the BBC had a high level of biased reporting, compared to 33% who were satisfied with the BBC's news coverage. And that the BBC is 'too biased' featured amongst spontaneous criticisms of the BBC voiced during quantitative research.
- “They’ve got their own view and they stick to it. They see things from their angle, never look at it from other people’s angles.”**

Participant in qualitative research, C2DE, 31-45, heavy TV watchers, Scotland
- 5.22 We received very many views, particularly from individuals and representative groups who responded to the public consultation, which suggested that a high value is placed on the BBC's role in helping people take part in the democratic process and debate more generally. They saw the BBC's role in this respect not being limited to its news and current affairs programming, and coverage of elections, but extending to 'social action' programmes cutting across the full range of the BBC's output, encouraging public debate and working directly with communities. Respondents tended to advocate an important role for the BBC in promoting 'citizenship', for example by providing the means for citizens to interact and participate in debate across a variety of platforms – like TV, radio and the internet – and at both local and national level.
- 5.23 Another point of value echoed in many responses to public consultation as well as in our qualitative research is the BBC's role of providing 'shared experience' for the nation – by providing programmes that large numbers of people watch or listen to and then discuss afterwards.
- “I think the BBC should be always experimenting with new ways to get us involved with things, using all their available TV, radio and online services, and they should do this more with international subjects, not just British ones. I should be able to go to BBC services at any time and get linked in to other people and other places that can share information about things I am interested in, like human rights, overseas development issues and the environment.”**

P Gilbert, consultation respondent

...supporting, nurturing and promoting the UK's culture...

- 5.24 A recurring theme of our qualitative research and public consultation was the value placed on the BBC's cultural role. This value was placed not only on what the BBC brings to audiences and communities, but also on its role in relation to the wider creative industries – across a range of areas like the visual arts, music, film – and other elements of the UK's culture, like sport.
- 5.25 Representatives of the music industry and musicians in particular saw music as an essential part of the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster. They saw the BBC as having a key role in making as diverse a range of music as possible available to as wide an audience as possible – at both a national and local level – through its television and radio services and, for example, through the BBC orchestras.

“The virtual elimination of intelligent programmes from BBC2 before 10.30pm is perhaps the major act of cultural vandalism of the past 5 years.”

M Sparks, consultation respondent

- 5.26 The BBC was also seen by the public as having an important role in film – in fact, when asked what type of programmes they personally watched nowadays, ‘films’ was the most popular choice amongst participants in our quantitative survey. And the UK Film Council was very clear in its message that the BBC might do more to invest in British film making and showcase the full range of UK and world cinema.
- 5.27 Respondents to the public consultation were polarised in their attitude to the BBC's sports coverage, perhaps reflecting polarised attitudes to sport at large. 39% of participants in our quantitative research said they watched sports programmes on BBC television and 16% listened to them on BBC radio. However, only 12% of participants in our survey wanted to see more sports programmes on BBC television, and a similar proportion (14%) thought there were already too many. 23% of participants thought the BBC was the best sports broadcaster, compared to 36% for Sky.
- 5.28 A number of public consultation respondents did suggest, in the light of perceived sports saturation on the BBC, that bidding for the broadcasting rights to major sporting events was an extravagant expense best left to the commercial sector. On the other hand, it was felt that, as a public service broadcaster, the BBC had both a right and an obligation to provide the free-to-air screening of international and national sporting events.

...efforts to represent the diverse make-up of the UK...

- 5.29 It is clear from all strands of research and consultation, as well as visits around the country, that the public places value on the work that the BBC does to represent the nations, regions and communities of the UK – for example, through its national and local services, programming tailored for the nations and regions, and programmes that reflect the needs of minority communities and communities of interest. 42% of participants in our quantitative research thought the BBC was the best broadcaster of information about their area or region – neck and neck with ITV.

- 5.30 However, there are concerns in some areas. For example, a majority of respondents to public consultation held the view that overall the BBC is too focused on London. This was an argument put forward frequently at meetings with industry representatives around the UK.

“I do not believe the BBC represents the whole of the country. Production being located in London, the most expensive area in the country, does not represent ‘Best Value’. Why not re-locate to a cheaper location? Many film production companies do this, why not the BBC?”

Paul Carney, consultation respondent

- 5.31 63% of participants in our quantitative research agreed that the BBC is ‘good at representing cultural diversity’ and welcomed its perceived efforts to improve representation of minority cultures and ethnicities.
- 5.32 However, although there was a widely shared perception amongst consultation respondents that the BBC makes a considerable effort to ensure that all social and geographical groupings are captured and reflected in the Corporation’s programming, there were strong views particularly amongst organisations that represent minority groups that more could be done.
- 5.33 It should also be noted that a small minority of respondents expressed the view, often in very strong terms, that the representation of black and minority ethnic communities is disproportionately large in comparison to the size of these communities within the UK population.

...in the nations of the UK...

- 5.34 A criticism of the three national television services in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland was that alternative schedules deny viewers access to programmes enjoyed by English licence fee payers. It was suggested that digital technology could help by allowing viewers to select which national schedule they wish to watch. And there was a significant view that the BBC’s aim should be not only to reflect communities back to themselves, but to the rest of the UK.

“They do a kind of stereotype of Scottish people as well, the BBC. Look at the Eastenders, the baddy is always a Scottish guy. Little Mo’s boyfriend.”

Participant in qualitative research, C2DE, 31-45, heavy TV watcher

- 5.35 Views about the BBC’s output and activities in Northern Ireland appear to be particularly positive, with BBC Northern Ireland held in high esteem according to our survey research. People from Northern Ireland we consulted in our research appeared to care more about how Northern Ireland is presented to the rest of the country rather than how it is presented to the local community.
- 5.36 Our research shows that the BBC’s commitment to Welsh language programming is valued very highly by Welsh speakers. In common with the view in Scotland, respondents to consultation and participants in our qualitative research tended to see Welsh news and current affairs coverage as being overly centred on Cardiff.

- 5.37 The overall view given by our research in Scotland is that media coverage of Scottish issues is thin, although the BBC is not necessarily singled out from other broadcasters for criticism. Our quantitative results indicate that people in Scotland tend to have a more negative perception of the BBC than those in other parts of the UK. However, organisations with an interest in Gaelic programming praised the BBC's commitment in this area and called for it to be reflected in any new Charter.

“I think the cultural climate within the UK is pretty well catered for by the BBC – local TV and radio broadcasting take all sectors of the community into consideration, and culture-specific programmes seem to be available. I appreciate, though, as a white female with no specific religious or cultural needs, I may not be the right person to begin to contemplate this question.”

Participant in deliberative research, C2DE, Newark

- 5.38 It appears from research and consultation that while people value the focus on Scotland provided by programmes such as the Scottish edition of Newsnight, many would like to see Scotland and Scottish topics included in the mainstream rather than covered separately. As in Wales, there was a clear sense from public consultation and qualitative research that news and current affairs coverage was perceived to be heavily skewed to major urban areas.

...and the English regions...

- 5.39 Although ‘good regional programmes’ do feature amongst aspects of the BBC that generated spontaneous praise in our quantitative research, they are quite low in prominence. However, among those who expressed an opinion in public consultation, there was a strong sense – as there was in the nations – of the BBC being too focused on London. A significant minority felt that the BBC exported metropolitan values and opinions throughout the UK. As one respondent put it, “regional broadcasting can give the impression of being a poor relation to its London-based senior relatives”.

...as well as across communities of common interest...

- 5.40 There was a range of views expressed in this area, by individual and representative respondents to our public consultation, and by participants in our survey research. The BBC was seen by some to have made pioneering efforts in improving cultural and gender diversity both in front of and behind the screen. However, others told us that it could go further in embracing ideas on race, representation and accountability.
- 5.41 The balance of opinion from both consultation and research was that value was placed on the idea that the BBC should cater for ethnic communities. For instance, where it is known and used, the BBC Asian Network is valued highly.
- 5.42 However, there were some criticisms from respondents from and representing ethnic communities about what the BBC, and the wider media, actually does for those communities. Many young black people and young male Muslims of Asian origin complained about stereotyping and negative role models in BBC programmes. One example cited was the TV programme *The Crouches*.

- 5.43 Our quantitative research shows that 64% of participants agree with the statement that ‘Parents can rely on the quality of the BBC’s children’s programmes’. There was an even higher level of agreement amongst those with children.

...and its international role and reputation...

- 5.44 The public values the BBC’s international reputation very highly, ranking it number one in prompted descriptions of the Corporation. In this respect it far outperformed other public service broadcasters. We received responses from people all over the world expressing their positive view of the BBC, particularly its news service.

BBC America

The public consultation received a deluge of complaints about the quality of BBC America. The removal of Eastenders from the channel was the most often repeated complaint in the whole consultation.

- 5.45 Organisations working in the field of international development told us the World Service is important to hundreds of millions of people and makes a powerful contribution to human rights and sustainable development. For many it is seen as the only source of reliable, unbiased information.
- 5.46 The same group also see the BBC as having an important role in reflecting international issues back to the UK population.

...(although there might be scope for building better partnerships in some areas)...

- 5.47 Our programme of visits around the country provided evidence of the BBC’s engagement in partnerships with a variety of organisations and individuals. However, the point was often made to us by those engaged in partnerships with the BBC that they can only deliver maximum benefit by being truly inclusive, with both sides – however big they are – involved on an equal footing.
- 5.48 For example, there was a strong sense amongst bodies expert in education that there was scope for the BBC to develop better and more extensive partnerships with other organisations in the field, particularly in developing technological solutions to break down access barriers.

...and the BBC has always been there.

- 5.49 Last, but not least, a notable finding from our qualitative research was that many people value the BBC just because it has always been there. It was seen by many participants in qualitative research as standing for ‘traditional British values’. Our quantitative research demonstrated the BBC to have the strongest image of any UK broadcaster.

“I think the BBC gives me a warm feeling. It’s very familiar, it doesn’t change a great deal. It’s like an old blanket. Sort of dog eared. A comforter.”

Participant in qualitative research, AB, 31-45, light TV watchers, Northern England

- 5.50 On the other hand, some people think this makes it old-fashioned and too much ‘part of the establishment’. And even amongst people who took the most supportive positions in qualitative research, few thought of it as ‘cutting edge’ or ‘risk-taking’, even though that is one of the reasons sometimes put forward for the licence fee.

People expect quality from the BBC...

5.51 For the majority of respondents to consultation, programme quality is vital – in the words of one respondent, it is “at the heart of the contract with the audience” – the BBC should deliver the highest possible quality, whatever the subject or type of treatment involved. In our quantitative research people cited high quality programmes – particularly news programmes – as the aspect of the BBC they valued most.

...although there seems to be a perception that quality is in decline...

5.52 There was a strong feeling from public consultation and qualitative research that the quality of the BBC’s output, particularly TV, has got worse in the last few years. From our qualitative research, strong supporters of the BBC seemed to think that BBC TV, and especially BBC1, had lost ground in areas where it used to be prominent, particularly drama and comedy. Any perceived decline in quality appears to be confined to television – only 8% of people we asked as part of our quantitative survey thought BBC radio programmes had got worse.

“The BBC does produce some of the cheap-and-low-quality programming (Changing Rooms etc) but I don’t want the BBC to become elitist.”

Darren Fisher, consultation respondent

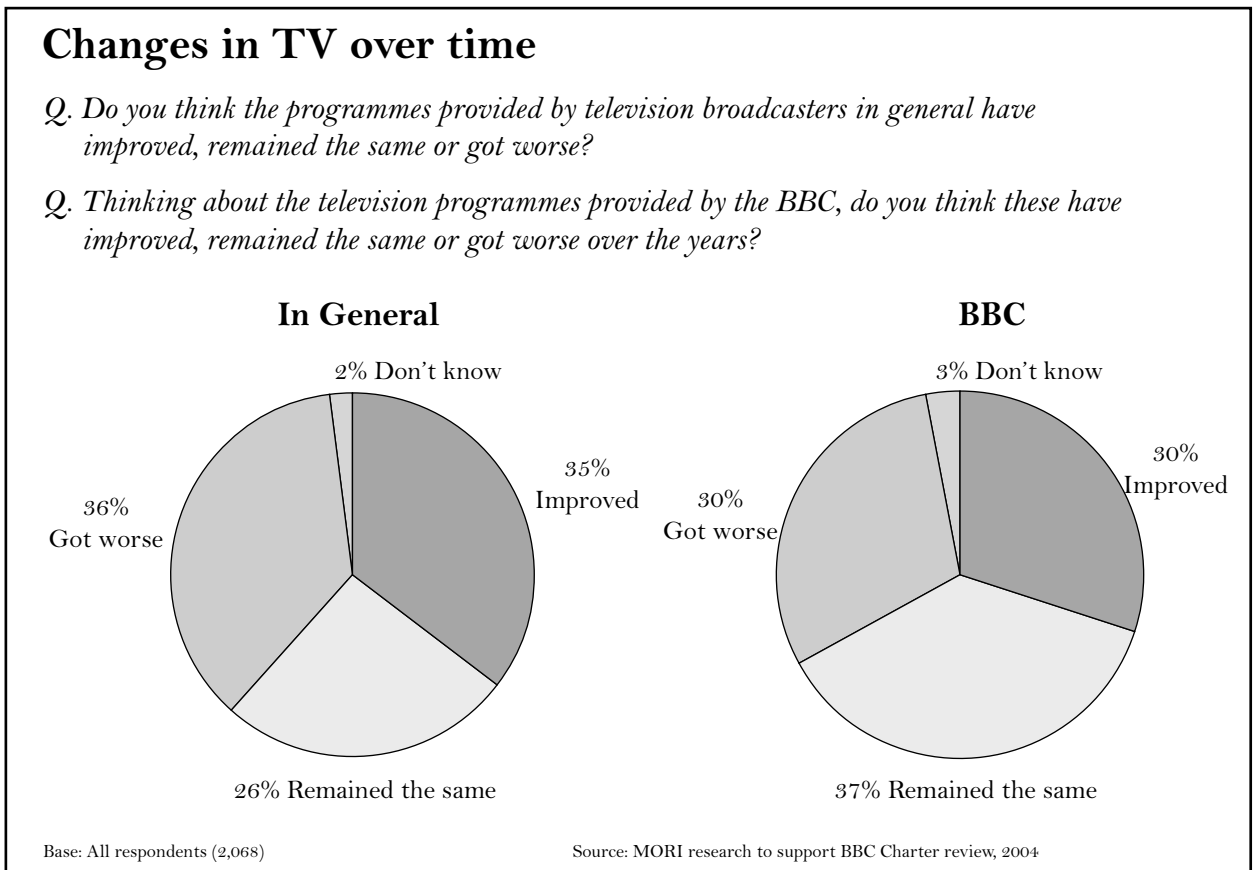
5.53 People’s concerns tend to fall into three main areas:

- Too many repeats of programmes that do not interest them – and using repeats in an unimaginative way
- “Dumbing down”
- “Copycat” programming – too many game shows, reality and makeover programmes that are not all that different from those offered by other channels.

5.54 It is difficult to tell how much of this is because people tend to remember the good programmes from the past and to forget the bad ones. In fact, many of the examples of highly valued BBC programming were from the past – even as many as twenty or thirty years ago.

5.55 Our quantitative research was less clear. The perception that there were ‘too many repeats’ on television, ‘programmes were dumbed down too much’ and a ‘decline in programme standards’ featured highly in spontaneous criticisms of the BBC – constituting 3 of the top five concerns (the others being having to pay the licence fee, and the level of the licence fee).

5.56 About 30% of people thought that BBC TV had got worse over time, whilst 37% thought they remained the same and 30% thought they had improved (see box). People in older age groups were the most likely to think that quality had declined – conversely, those who thought it had improved tended to belong to younger age groups. However, a finding of our deliberative research was that “the unanimity about the sense of decline in quality of BBC television output is startling”.



...perhaps because of a desire to maximise ratings.

- 5.57 Decline in quality was seen as being at least partly as a result of the BBC following rather than leading current trends. The BBC's value was often perceived to have been eroded by an approach to scheduling that places concern about ratings – particularly audience share – above the Corporation's historic role as leading public service broadcasting in the UK. The point came up many times in consultation that the BBC's success should be judged on measures like the quality, diversity and distinctiveness of its output and impact on audiences – not necessarily on audience size.
- 5.58 On the other hand, some people argued that the BBC had to get the balance right between popular and “elitist” programming.
- 5.59 In summary, the BBC was seen to have to strike a careful balance between the provision of popular entertainment, which brings it directly into competition with commercial broadcasters, and the provision of other public service broadcasting which, by its nature, is likely to attract rather smaller audiences.

So how does all this fit in with the wider provision of public service broadcasting?

- 5.60 When they were first asked, only a few people had a good idea of what exactly is meant by the term ‘public service broadcasting’ (PSB) – and this applied across all public service broadcasters, not just the BBC.
- 5.61 After they had thought about it and discussed it, they could identify the kinds of things that might be part of PSB – things like:

- ‘Quality’ – how good programmes are and how well they are made
- Offering a range of different types of programmes, and a variety of programmes within those types
- Offering programmes that reflect the needs of different communities, satisfy all audience types and represent different points of view
- Offering programmes and services that help people learn, reflect the different cultures of the UK and enable people to take part in the democratic process, eg quality news and current affairs programmes

5.62 In general, people who took part in our qualitative and deliberative research tended to think that the BBC provides all of these things, but that these attributes don’t say all there is to say about the BBC taken on their own. Those who liked the BBC a lot tended to think that having no advertising and, in theory at least, not being completely driven by ratings were important elements of PSB – and that the BBC was the only broadcaster able to give them this. People who liked the BBC less sometimes thought that PSB meant less sport and entertainment, and as a result, less that they might want to watch.

5.63 The BBC’s role as a public service broadcaster attracted a range of views. Some respondents said that the BBC should not be reduced to being merely a supplier of pure PSB, narrowly defined by ‘genre’ – for example, arts, religion, regional programming, current affairs, etc. – or in narrow economic terms such as genres the market fails to provide. It should, instead adopt a wide and relatively flexible definition to “educate, entertain and inform”. On the other hand, there were those who wanted more emphasis on the ‘inform’ and ‘educate’ elements and less on entertainment – for example, derivative formats, game shows, reality TV etc. Overall, however, our qualitative research suggested that the BBC is seen as meeting what people saw as the main attributes of PSB.

5.64 For example, our open forum discussions often sparked lively debate about what constitutes PSB broadcasting. One example is the television programme *Fame Academy* – some believed such ‘reality television’ fulfils many aspects of a PSB remit, including building talent, interactivity, activities with schools, and resulting in effects beyond the programme, for instance in reading and learning. Many believed that PSB is about an approach rather than a type of programme. On the other hand, others felt that it was a prime example of a derivative entertainment show which the BBC should not commission.