

## **Response from the Society of Authors to the BBC Digital Curriculum Service Consultation Paper**

The Society of Authors has already responded to the BBC's initial Consultation Document of September 2000 and to the Consultation Paper 'Curriculum Online' issued by the National Grid for Learning and the then Department for Education and Employment in April 2001. Here is our further response to the new BBC Digital Curriculum Service submission.

### **Licence fee funding (Cover letter, 1.3):**

The BBC produces a range of excellent educational programmes, but we are concerned that it should not be given preferential treatment and that licence fee revenue should not be used to support the BBC Digital Curriculum in competition with other suppliers, which have to operate for a profit. It is evidently tempting for the BBC to become a main content commissioner and provider, in view of its large resources and its experience of educational broadcasting. We think that such temptation should be resisted. Just as educational book publishing developed and evolved through competition, there is plenty of scope for educational online services to do the same. It would distort the market to allow the BBC to build on its dominant position from the start.

### **The BBC service (3.1):**

The BBC vision is of a comprehensive service, providing materials for 75% of subjects. However the BBC does not expect its Virtual Learning Environment to carry content from other providers. It is vitally important that a neutral platform is provided, from which the entire Curriculum Online may be obtained. In particular, smaller companies must be guaranteed straightforward access to that platform, or their growth will be stifled. It is also necessary that materials be organised by subject matter rather than supplier, because that is how teachers will most productively be able to search for them.

In whatever format the materials are provided online, we are concerned that the content must complement traditional forms of learning, as originally proposed, not to replace them. The educational value of fact-finding on the Internet cannot be compared to that of researching with books. Furthermore, families should not feel pressured into providing Internet access at home.

### **Curriculum materials (3.2):**

We welcome the BBC's commitment to providing a wide spread of subject coverage and the opportunities this provides for other suppliers to compete across the board.

### **Service support (3.4):**

It is not clear from the BBC's proposals whether teacher training will be necessary for schools to obtain maximum benefit from the service. Although the first schools to register will be given two free places at a training session, presumably the majority of schools will need to fund their staff to attend?

### **Free at the point of use (4.1):**

We are concerned that, given the limitations to school budgets, if ELC's are not available in the long term, teachers will inevitably come to rely on the BBC's free materials. It also seems likely that schools will give preference to materials that can also be accessed online in students' homes (for homework and revision), rather than only during lesson times.

### **Demand-side funding (5.1):**

At present, the Government is committed to providing £50m investment in Curriculum Online for the academic year 2002/3, and there is an expectation that this level of funding will continue for the medium term. This is a positive step, but unless funding is guaranteed for the

long term, neither schools nor smaller educational suppliers will be able to plan continuing initiatives. Nor is there much chance that smaller suppliers will be able to compete with the BBC which already has an approved spend of £150m of licence fee funds until the end of 2006/7 and the possibility of supplementary revenue and contributions from other sources.

**Distinctive, high penetration service (5.2):**

It is predicted that the BBC service could cover up to 50% of learning outcomes. The market for digital materials must be competitive and the products it offers need to be as wide-ranging as the traditional educational market provides. It is our particular concern that certain Curriculum Online materials should not give rise to the sort of distortion of materials that has been caused by exam text 'badging': There are three exam boards in England and Wales, and the boards' own texts are badged. Inevitably, teachers tend to buy badged books, and also tend to avoid subjects or approaches that do not fit directly into board requirements. In addition, examiners tend to mark somewhat subjectively, and the less scope there is for variety, the harder it is to see a student's real abilities behind the increasingly uniform 'stock' answers. Education should be about supplementary not core reading, and we feel the current system is destroying that approach. The risk that teachers will tend to choose the free and/or endorsed materials might be reduced by the introduction of a transparently independent review board that regularly published reviews of comparative courses etc in good time before the start of each academic year. This would also benefit independent suppliers producing quality products but lacking the promotional might of larger companies.

**Sources of supply (5.3.1):**

The BBC commitment to spending half of the licence fee funding (£75m) on commissioning content for the Digital Curriculum externally for the first five years would undoubtedly have a positive economic impact on favoured content providers. With the BBC retaining a controlling editorial hand, however, we fear the negative effects this could have on the plurality of Digital Curriculum materials.

**Upholding the BBC's editorial values:**

Experience suggests that the BBC's quasi-monopolistic control/domination in some areas of broadcasting has enabled it to dictate terms from freelance writers and other artists and producers that would be wholly unacceptable in a more competitive market, and which make it very difficult for creators to make a living in this area. Needless to say, to ensure the quality of the basic materials of any educational package (especially one that is to be used so widely), those involved must be skilled at writing and teaching, and able to devote sufficient time to creating a quality product. We are deeply concerned that the BBC's current practice could all too easily be transferred to the online educational materials market under the Digital Curriculum.

Mark Le Fanu  
The Society of Authors  
84 Drayton Gardens  
London SW10 9SB

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