

# **Submission to the public consultation on BBC digital television by the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce)**

## **Introduction**

Since its inception in 1754 the RSA has encouraged the development of a principled and prosperous society, in which human potential can be fully realised. Today, we do this through five manifesto challenges:

- encouraging enterprise
- moving towards a zero waste society
- fostering resilient communities
- developing a capable population
- advancing global citizenship.

The BBC's public service commitment 'to enrich the lives of everyone in the UK with programmes that inform, educate and entertain' relates directly to these challenges, particularly fostering resilient communities, developing a capable population and advancing global citizenship. It is, therefore, under these three headings that we shall comment upon the contribution of the BBC's digital television channels prior to registering some concerns about these services and the BBC's submission concerning them.

## **Fostering resilient communities**

The RSA aims to promote the development and design of resilient communities that are tolerant and safe and that exercise creative stewardship of the built and natural environments.

Two of the BBC's related public service aims are to:

- enrich the cultural life of the nation by enabling the UK's best creative talents to provide a diverse range of memorable, uplifting and enjoyable programmes
- help to make the UK a more inclusive society by creating programmes and services that connect communities, bring people together and encourage participation.

The RSA accepts the BBC's submission that all of its digital channels offer a mixed genre range of programming in a way that its competitors do not. They also do an admirable job in reflecting the cultural diversity of the UK in a way that is accessible and appropriate to their target audience.

We particularly applaud the way in which CBeebies and CBBC provide children with a positive introduction to diversity through the mixed social and ethnic backgrounds of their presenting teams and through the diversity reflected in their entertainment output. BBC Three and BBC Four both deliver well on their specific commitment to provide entertainment, information and arts coverage which reflects all sections of UK society.

## **Developing a capable population**

The RSA aims to increase world class educational opportunities that cater for individual aptitude and aspirations; that realise everyone's lifelong learning potentials and that produce a skilled and capable nation.

The BBC has related commitments to:

- underpin active and informed citizenship by providing trusted, impartial and in-depth news and information that helps people make sense of the world
- contribute to education for all by creating a wide range of accessible programmes and services that connect communities, bring people together and encourage participation.

The RSA thinks that the provision of news on CBBC is a unique and invaluable resource, providing children with an essential perspective on the world around them and setting the stage for them to become informed, engaged citizens. We also very much welcome the global emphasis of BBC Four news. We would like to see more of this content on BBC Three which is weaker in delivering news, though its current affairs coverage is high quality and innovative. In their submission the BBC acknowledges that the 7 o'clock news format has not been successful and that they are developing options to redress this. We welcome this commitment, as we believe that informed, impartial information about the world is one of the key capabilities that people need to contribute effectively to society.

The educational quality of much of the children's programming is self evident and we accept the BBC's submission that much of BBC Three's output in all genres is educational in the way in which it tackles real issues likely to be experienced by its target audience. BBC Four also provides high quality educational content through its arts and factual programming. We would also encourage the BBC to further develop the use of the internet as an educational tool that supports their television output.

### **Advancing Global Citizenship**

The RSA aims to advance global citizenship in the increasingly interconnected world by promoting responsible behaviours by individuals and by public, private, voluntary and other organisations.

Many of the positive features of the BBC digital channels already described also contribute towards advancing global citizenship, particularly BBC Four's global news coverage. Factual and arts coverage on BBC Four and to a lesser extent BBC Three also provides useful coverage of people, issues and cultures from around the world. BBC Four's foreign language film programming is also highly laudable. It is our view that the cross-cultural understanding fostered by such programmes is essential in changing behaviours and advancing a sense of global citizenship. We would urge the BBC to further develop the range of content that develops understanding of different culture and localities.

### **Concerns**

The RSA feels in general that the BBC digital channels make a positive contribution to the cultural life of the UK. We think that BBC Four is particularly valuable and unique with its mission:

“to be the most intellectually and culturally enriching channel on television, with an ambition to play a positive role in British cultural life both on and off-screen, and to deliver an international perspective to its audience.”

Our concerns are not so much with the content of the digital channels as with their accessibility and their relationship to the BBC's public service function as a whole.

According to DCMS figures approximately 60% of households do not currently have access to digital television. Our concern is that serious cultural and factual programming is increasingly corralled into digital channels and thus becomes less available to the majority of the population, undermining the BBC's charter commitment 'to enrich the lives of everyone in the UK'.

One of the conditions of consent for BBC Four was that 'this service must not be developed at the expense of music and arts programmes on BBC One and BBC Two'. The BBC's submission to the review states:

“The launch of BBC Four has not seen any diminution in the provision of arts programming on BBC One and BBC Two. In fact hours and spend on the analogue channels have increased from the pre-launch position.

“The BBC offered specific commitments to at least 245 hours of music and arts programming on BBC One and BBC Two via its Statement of Programme Policy in 2003/04.”

While we accept that the total number of hours devoted to arts programming has increased, we would contend that there has been a diminution in the quality and the scheduling prominence of such programmes.

Populist arts series such as *The Big Read*, while they clearly fulfil a valuable function in engaging the public with literature, do not provide the same in-depth artistic coverage that is available to digital viewers.

Similarly, while we applaud the number of foreign language films on BBC Four, we are particularly concerned that such films are hardly ever now shown on BBC One or BBC Two.

Similar concerns could be raised around the innovative drama and entertainment on BBC Three. The BBC's submission claims that 'Without BBC Three neither *Three Non-Blondes*, *Little Britain*, *Burn It* nor *Monkey Dust* would have been commissioned.' We are troubled by the implication here that the 'natural' home for innovative material of this sort is a digital channel which is still inaccessible to the majority of the population.

While there is some transfer of programming from the digital to terrestrial channels, this tends to be restricted to programmes that have achieved relative ratings success on their original channels. The criterion for such transfer appears to be popularity rather than public service value. Prime time content on BBC Two and particularly BBC One remains dominated by lifestyle programming and generic drama.

Overall, we recognise the role and the value of the BBC digital channels in producing serious arts programming, innovative new drama and entertainment and global current affairs. We are concerned, however, that such programmes should not be confined to a digital ghetto where they cannot be accessed by everyone. This is both a public service and a consumer choice issue.

We recognise that as we move towards digital switchover in 2010, more and more people will be able to receive digital channels, but we believe that there is still a compelling argument for an appropriate mix of content on all television channels. The BBC's submission places great importance on mixed genre scheduling, claiming that:

"The BBC has always aspired to inform, educate and entertain. Our new television networks were designed and approved to complete a portfolio of services that together achieve these purposes in a way that is relevant to everyone in the UK. [...] This is reflected in our commitment to a mixed schedule of programming across our new services."

This is identified as a key differentiator from the digital services of their competitors. We believe that while the BBC has been largely successful in achieving this across its new services, it is vital that this success does not come at the expense of high quality mixed genre programming on BBC One and BBC Two. We would therefore urge the review to look carefully at the impact of digital channels on BBC One and Two and to reinforce the BBC's commitment to ensuring that their new services add to, rather than subtract value from, their original ones.

**RSA**

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