

# REVIEW OF THE BBC's ROYAL CHARTER

## Response to the Government's National Consultation by the Society of Authors

### 1. Background

1.1 The Society of Authors has a direct interest in the future of the BBC, and is pleased to contribute to the national consultation as a first step towards establishing the framework under which the BBC will operate, once its current Charter comes to an end in 2006.

1.2 The Society of Authors, a non-profit making organisation, was founded in 1884 'to protect the rights and further the interests of authors'. Today it has over 7,500 members. The Society's Broadcasting Group represents all Society members who work in radio, television, film and other such broadcasting media within the UK and abroad.

1.3 This paper does not cover the full spectrum of issues set out in the Government's document *Review of the BBC's Royal Charter*. We restrict ourselves to those aspects of particular concern to members of the Society. The arguments rehearsed, and the recommendations made, reflect the views of over 1,000 professionally active members of the Society, gathered from a survey of members' opinions.

1.4 The paper is set out as follows:

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1.5 The Society is grateful to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for allowing some additional time, beyond the formal closing date for the receipt of responses, in order to permit a full canvass of the opinions of members as a basis for this submission.

## **BBC CHARTER RENEWAL**

### **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **by the Society of Authors**

1. The BBC should continue to be funded, as it is now, mainly through the licence fee.
2. The BBC should continue to receive 100% of licence fee revenue.
3. The BBC should be specifically relieved from any requirement to attract large audiences to its main TV channels to justify its funding by the licence fee. Its contribution to British cultural life should be valued and measured by methods which supersede audience ratings.
4. The new Charter should prohibit the BBC from selling advertising on its national TV and radio channels and networks.
5. The BBC's public service broadcasting remit should be re-stated, and the BBC required to examine every aspect of its activities in the light of that remit.
6. The Board of Governors, or whatever future monitoring body may be established, should have as a primary responsibility the duty to ensure that the BBC fulfils its public service broadcasting remit.
7. The BBC should be required to establish new methods of measuring and evaluating audience appreciation which are more appropriate than ratings to a strengthened public service broadcasting remit.
8. The BBC should be required to provide comprehensive television and radio programming, covering the widest spectrum of international, national, regional, local, cultural, specialist and minority interest audiences.
9. The BBC should be required to adhere to the highest standards of impartiality, balance and fairness in communicating news and information to the public. Some mechanism should be incorporated into the obligations laid on the Corporation that is capable of monitoring achievement in this area, and of demanding higher standards if a falling away is perceived.
10. The BBC's output depends critically on the talents and training of its contributors and employees and it should be required to foster the highest standards in its dealings with them.
11. The BBC should be permitted to augment its income by publishing, marketing and sales through BBC Worldwide, under strict rules that protect the interests of its home audiences and the rights of contributors to its programmes.
12. The BBC should be required to encourage development of, and facilitate access to, both digital and online broadcasting, and there should be 100% UK coverage for free-to-view digital television as rapidly as possible, and well before the proposed analogue switch-off at the end of 2010.

## 2. The Licence Fee

2.1 So long has the licence fee been with us that it is all too easy to overlook the fact that for more than two decades it covered radio only – the opposite of the situation today, in which nothing has to be paid by people who confine themselves to having only a radio set. It was introduced in November 1922, 13 days before the BBC went on air, and its price (10 shillings, or 50p) remained unchanged until 1946 when it included television and went up to £1. This combined licence did not go up again for another 19 years, again in sharp contrast to today when it goes up every year; in 1971 the radio licence was abolished.

2.2 The licence fee thus covers only TV, and any number of TV sets in the same household. It has risen in line with inflation and from April 2004 is £121 a year. This money has always gone entirely to the BBC and nobody else. It now provides more than 90% of the BBC's £2 billion a year income, with the remainder coming from the Corporation's commercial activities and, for BBC World Service, the annual foreign office grant.

2.3 People have always grumbled about the licence fee, as they do about any compulsory levy. While the BBC provided 100% of the broadcasting in Britain, there could be little objection to it receiving 100% of the licence fee. With the growth of other broadcasters, however, starting with ITV in 1955, continuing with commercial radio in 1973 and Channel 4 in 1982, and exploding in the last two decades with Sky and other satellite and cable and digital networks, that argument seemed to weaken. Why should a family who choose to watch only Sky, which they pay for, have to pay an additional £121 a year to the BBC? Several legal challenges to the licence fee, some invoking the Human Rights Act, have been mounted on these grounds in the courts.

2.4 A few members of the Society raised other objections. Twelve wanted a dedicated tax rather than a licence fee, and three wanted rebates for poorer licence payers – and both those demands are underpinned by the undeniable fact that the licence fee is regressive. It hits the poor more than it does the rich because it takes the same sum from both. In that sense it is an anachronistic poll tax. Six felt that the collection of the fee (by TV Licensing, in Bristol) was not thorough, spending more on administration and chasing non-payers than it gained.

2.5 But the opposite view – that the licence fee should remain – has overwhelming support among members of the Society. It is believed, passionately, that the licence fee protects the BBC both from government interference and any baleful effects of advertising and thus guarantees its independence; that at 33p a day it offers outstanding value for money; that it is the mainstay of a broadcasting system that has served us well and attracts widespread affection and respect; and that the weaknesses of the alternative systems (direct state funding, advertising and subscription) would be most glaringly exposed when considering the precious thing that is BBC radio, which consumes more than 25% of the BBC's total income. It is also pointed out that in practice more than 90% of the population choose to watch or listen to BBC programmes each week.

2.6 The Society's members clearly endorse Professor Steven Barnett's view so cogently expressed in the Spring issue of *The Author*, that 'the funding system may not be perfect, but the global consensus is that the UK has got it more right than anyone else.' More than 86% (76% strongly, 10% mildly) agreed with the proposition 'The BBC should continue to be funded mainly through the licence fee'. Only 9% disagreed (5% strongly, 4% mildly) and 5% offered no view.

***It is recommended, therefore, that the BBC should continue to be funded, as it is now, mainly through the licence fee.***

### **3. The Licence Fee – Is it for Sharing?**

3.1 As already outlined, opposition to the licence fee has gained significant ground in recent years. In addition, so has opposition to the existing arrangements whereby the BBC receives 100% of the licence fee while its commercial rivals get none – even though they too have to make public service broadcasting programmes.

3.2 This opposition is based on at least three principles. First, it seems unfair to treat the broadcasters so differently. Second, it is said that the growth of digital technology, and eventual analogue switch-off, will in time produce a consumer sovereignty in every household, which will mean that a compulsory licence fee continuing to go only to the BBC, when King and Queen Consumer choose not to have any BBC, is not only absurd but indefensible. Third, the natural resentment has been magnified by harsh economic realities: since 2001, the BBC's licence fee income has risen by 14% while the advertising revenues of ITV have dropped by 6%. Such is the enormous advantage and privilege of a guaranteed income.

3.3 Not surprisingly, therefore, the campaign to give a share of the licence fee to commercial broadcasters – in order to help them make the same sort of quality programmes that the BBC will never have difficulty making because of that guaranteed income – is supported by some big names. Barry Cox, deputy chairman of Channel 4, the government's digital TV adviser, and a former senior executive with ITV, argued in a Demos pamphlet in February this year that the BBC should no longer receive 100% of the licence fee. The Conservative Party commission chaired by David Elstein, former chief executive of Channel 5 and another former senior executive in ITV, has also advocated that broadcasters other than the BBC should be allowed to compete for licence fee income.

3.4 Most of the Society's members who responded, however, clearly felt there were dangers in raiding the licence fee in this way and possibly weakening the BBC as a result. They felt it was not worth taking the risk. But the vote was more evenly split than with most of our questions, and the number of people who offered no opinion on the issue was high, at 18.5%. The proposition was: 'ITV and Channel 4 channels have to include elements of public service broadcasting in their schedules, funded from profits. They should be given a share of licence fee revenue in respect of these programmes.' 24% agreed (6% strongly, 18% mildly) but 68% disagreed (40% strongly, 18% mildly), with 18% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

***It is recommended that in the renewed Charter the BBC should continue to receive 100% of licence fee revenue.***

### **4. Audience Ratings and the Licence Fee**

4.1 Some argue that the licence fee can only be justified if the BBC maintains its share of the national audience. That view is sometimes countered by the argument that the BBC should not be given an unfair advantage over non-licence-funded competitors. However, if the BBC is broadcasting some programmes that are indistinguishable from those shown on commercial

channels in order to attract large audiences, it is failing to live up to its public service broadcasting ethic.

4.2 When commenting on these issues, one typical response was: ‘The BBC has always argued that it must attract large audiences since if audience share falls beneath a certain percentage, the public – particularly those who have satellite dishes – will argue that a compulsory licence fee backed by criminal sanctions is unjustified. But this view has led the BBC into a competition ethos which has resulted in a fall in quality TV.’

4.3 Another was: ‘The BBC must not be pushed to narrow its agenda because certain kinds of programmes are done on commercial channels. It must aim at doing all kinds of programmes better than the others (e.g. giving a new show time to catch on), thereby stimulating them to better quality. It should find an updated way of measuring Audience Appreciation as well as ratings, and not be governed by the latter as it has been lately. Something for everyone is a good general principle, and likely to remain so.’

4.4 Of Society members responding to the proposition that the BBC must attract large audiences to its main TV channels to justify its funding by the licence fee, only 29% agreed (9% strongly and 20% mildly) while 55% disagreed (30% mildly and 25% strongly). 16% had no opinion on the issue.

***It is recommended that the BBC should be specifically relieved from any requirement to attract large audiences to its main TV channels to justify its funding by the licence fee. Its contribution to British cultural life should be valued and measured by methods which supersede audience ratings.***

## **5. Advertising and the BBC**

### **5.A Should the BBC Sell Space to Advertisers?**

5.A.1 There is a seductive logic in the idea that the BBC should be allowed to sell space to advertisers, or at least allow direct sponsorship of programmes. Not perhaps on all its TV channels, runs the argument, but on the most popular where the BBC is already competing for viewers with the commercial stations. Not on its national radio networks, but perhaps on the local radio stations, where the BBC is in competition with commercial rivals. The introduction of some advertising, it is claimed, would relieve the nation from the need for continual annual increases in the licence fee. It might even be a means of abolishing the licence altogether.

5.A.2 There are, of course, strong arguments against the idea. A major consideration is the loss of income to the commercial TV and radio channels that would inevitably flow from the BBC entering the advertising marketplace.

5.A.3 The major loss, however, it is argued, would accrue not in the commercial, but in the cultural field. The great strength of the BBC – indeed its very *raison d’être* as a public service broadcaster – is precisely that it is not beholden to outside commercial interests for its funding, and that its clear and over-riding purpose is consequently to serve the interests of its audience, not of its paymasters. Should the BBC find itself soliciting for advertising, or even sponsorship, its

independence as a public service broadcasting organisation would inevitably be severely compromised.

5.A.4 The concept of the BBC accepting advertising on its airwaves attracted a sizeable proportion of individual comments from members of the Society, most of whom referred to an apparent commercialisation of the BBC in recent years. A typical remark was that ‘the BBC has lost its way, somewhat aping the commercial channels in seeking to provide sensationalism and cheap TV at the expense of high quality drama and documentaries.’ One respondent felt that ‘with the surrender to ratings, the BBC has taken on the look of a commercial station – in content particularly, but also in making trails for its own programmes and products to resemble the commercials on other channels.’ This phenomenon has concerned the Society’s Broadcasting Committee for some time, especially the BBC’s increasing tendency to cut the time previously allowed to programmes in order to create periods for commercial breaks on BBC1 and BBC2; in addition, sound commercials are increasing on the national radio networks, including Radio 3.

5.A.5 Research has revealed that these trails or commercials, occupying specially created slots between programmes, are commissioned by the BBC from some of London’s top advertising practitioners. To the casual viewer they appear indistinguishable from the commercials on BSkyB and ITV. No expense is spared in creating BBC commercials to promote BBC programmes and services, and to warn those who have not paid their licence fee of the consequences.

5.A.6 Thirty members complained about the idents, trails and cross-promotional services broadcast across the BBC. Several commented that ‘one might as well be watching or listening to a commercial channel’. The question arose, therefore, since the BBC already routinely broadcasts commercials, why not raise additional revenue from them rather than waste licence payers’ money on making commercials with little or no commercial point?

5.A.7 Nevertheless, and probably in view of the arguments rehearsed above, members of the Society decided it was not appropriate for the BBC to be allowed to sell space to advertisers. 88% disagreed with the proposal, preferring the BBC to be funded primarily by the licence fee.

## **5.B The Effect of Advertising on the BBC’s Output**

5.B.1 A secondary question about advertising was raised with members. What would be the effect on the BBC’s output, in particularly its Reithian values, if the BBC were allowed to sell advertising? Would this adversely affect the quality of BBC programmes?

5.B.2 From the response it is clear that the majority thought that the BBC’s independence would be adversely affected if advertisers paid for time on the BBC, and that even though members deplored the perceived ‘dumbing down’ of BBC programmes in recent years, particularly on the main terrestrial channels, even more ratings-chasing would result from the BBC being even partially funded from advertising. The advertiser demands a big audience share. This is not appropriate as the main driving force for a public service broadcaster.

5.B.3 One respondent to the questionnaire noted that ‘if the rights of minorities and their needs are to be met, the BBC must be prepared to tolerate smaller audiences.’ Others noted that ‘the BBC has dumbed down to chase ratings.’ A majority of respondents thought there was already too much

emphasis on police/hospital soaps and not enough on serious drama, documentaries and single plays.

5.B.4 In general members of the Society do not wish the BBC to become even more commercial in its programming and scheduling, but to provide programming which is challenging, unique and adventurous. Emulating ITV formats and turning all TV drama into soap-opera to satisfy the presumed desires of the lowest common denominator is regarded by members as inappropriate for a public service broadcaster with a guaranteed licence fee income.

5.B.5 The proposition put to members was that if the BBC's future source of funding were to include advertising, the result would be adversely to affect the quality of the BBC's output. A large majority – 84% of those responding – agreed (68% strongly, 16% mildly). 10% disagreed (5% strongly, 5% mildly). 6% had no opinion on the matter.

***It is recommended that the new Charter prohibits the BBC from selling advertising on its national TV and radio channels and networks.***

## **6. Should the BBC Discard Services?**

6.1 Any decision by, or requirement on, the BBC to slim down its overall operation should be considered against the criterion of what is best in the public interest, and not what is best for the BBC in competing against its commercial rivals. Arguably, the wrong kind of slimming down has already taken place. Every facility within the BBC, be it the library, the archive or even the pronunciation unit, has become a commodity to be budgeted for. The resulting under-use by producers of the BBC's previously matchless internal facilities – or in some cases their abandonment – has certainly not been in the audience's best interests.

6.2 There is some anxiety that the BBC is putting excessive resources into digital and other technological developments, although as yet only a minority of its audience can receive them. Investment in digital and on-line developments may prove to be a wise and far-sighted policy, but some overall balance must be preserved, and it must be remembered that for the vast majority of the nation at present BBC1 and BBC2 are the only national BBC television channels available, and Radios 1, 2, 3 and 4 the only national radio networks.

6.3 While there is no desire to see the BBC become a poor relation in this area there seems no reason, for example, for there to be two digital channels devoted to children's programmes when there seems little or nothing which defines them as different from commercial programming. It might be more economic to have one well-supported strand on terrestrial television, giving as many children as possible access to quality drama, music and book programmes, and leave the rest to commercial television.

6.4 Local broadcasting was launched to much acclaim at a time when the BBC was trying to break down the perception of a narrow and centralised BBC. Unfortunately not enough money went into the strategy. Television in the regions soon disappeared, and local radio succumbed to commercial competition with its phone-ins and pop music. If BBC local broadcasting is not willing to serve the public service ethos, but simply produces the same as its competitors, then this may be an area that could be trimmed. To do so would, nevertheless, appear as a failure in an important

sector of public service broadcasting. The challenge is for local radio to use its budget for the widest possible audience, but without loss of integrity and standards.

6.5 When asked whether the BBC should be slimmed down by discarding parts of its current output that are adequately catered for elsewhere, 41.5% of members agreed (12% strongly agreed, 29.5% mildly), 23.5% neither agreed or disagreed and 35% disagreed (19% strongly, 16% mildly).

***It is recommended that the BBC's public service broadcasting remit should be re-stated, and the BBC required to examine every aspect of its activities in the light of that remit.***

## **7. Public Service Broadcasting and the BBC**

7.1 The term 'public service broadcasting' is hard to define. Shakespeare, the Proms, *Today in Parliament*, *Blue Peter*, Lord Clark's *Civilization*, David Attenborough's *Life on Earth*, Simon Schama's *History of Britain*, Charles Hazlewood's *Genius of Mozart* - few would have a problem with these BBC programmes being so described. But what about some of the BBC's other offerings, such as *Fame Academy*, Jim Davidson's *Commercial Breakdown* or *Neighbours*?

7.2 Other broadcasters also have 'public service broadcasting' obligations imposed on them by law, including ITV and Channels 4 and Five. The first mounted *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown* – but also *Ministry of Mayhem* and the maggot-eating *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!* Channel 4 has shown both *Operatunity* and *Brookside*, Five both Tim Marlow's *Great Artists* and *Sex and Shopping*. No one organisation can claim a monopoly of 'public service broadcasting', even though for some it clearly forms a larger proportion of the output than others. And for millions of viewers who simply want to unwind, a piece of unashamed escapism such as *You've Been Framed*, *Charmed*, *Friends* or Ant and Dec's *Saturday Night Takeaway* may perform a valuable 'public service' in helping viewers to relax.

7.3 If definitions are difficult – and Ofcom is to consider these – then perhaps there are more revealing clues elsewhere. How did the term come to be used?

7.4 Commercial television began in Britain in 1955 and commercial radio in 1973, so the term 'public service broadcasting' gained wide use thereafter to differentiate the two forms of funding as well as to embrace the famous notion of the founding father of the BBC, John Reith, that broadcasting was to 'inform, educate and entertain'. Reith himself used the words 'public service' – a phrase meaning the common good, and originating in the 16th-century – with characteristic forcefulness in his 1949 book *Into The Wind*: 'It was the combination of public service motive, sense of moral obligation, assured finance and the brute force of monopoly which enabled the BBC to make of broadcasting what no other country has made of it.'

7.5 So public service broadcasting seems to indicate broadcasting that is in some way good for us, illuminating, revealing, inspiring, educative, balanced, ambitious, perhaps challenging and original, not necessarily popular (although it may turn out to be very popular) but necessarily possessed of integrity, and which takes its audiences to be not primarily consumers but citizens with both spiritual and material impulses. In this sense it is markedly different from broadcasting whose primary aim is to deliver audiences to advertisers and make money for owners and shareholders.

7.6 There are, as is well known, people who think the BBC has lost its way in recent years, that it has sought ratings (see below) above probity, that it has dumbed down, that it is more inclined to ‘give people what they want’, or more precisely what certain people think they want, that its programmes (particularly on television, less so on Radios 3 and 4) ask less of the audience. This may explain why 30% of Society members responding to a question about whether the BBC is fulfilling its public service role failed to give a vote of confidence in the BBC as a public service broadcaster, even though twice as many did it give their backing.

7.7 The proposition was: ‘The BBC is often referred to as a public service broadcaster. If public service broadcasting is defined as giving priority to quality rather than profit, and the interests of the audience rather than those of the broadcaster, the BBC is fulfilling this role.’ 65% agreed with this (32% strongly, 33% mildly), 30% disagreed (16% strongly, 14% mildly) and 5% did not express an opinion.

***It is recommended that the Board of Governors or whatever future monitoring body may be established, should have as a primary responsibility the duty to ensure that the BBC fulfils its public service broadcasting remit.***

## **8. Chasing Ratings**

8.1 There is nothing inherently wrong with television programmes being popular, but does the BBC attempt to appeal to the lowest common denominator at the expense of programmes with more substantial content? Public service broadcasters should be as concerned about audience appreciation indices as they are about the number of viewers, yet there is a prevailing ethos amongst some of the BBC’s departments that public service is ‘giving the public what they want’. Name-recognition and celebrity presenters have become *de rigueur* even when more appropriate on-screen talent is available.

8.2 The Society commends with enthusiasm the BBC’s radio output – particularly Radios 2, 3, 4 and World Service – which, despite meagre budgets, consistently broadcast programmes of the very highest standards. We also applaud cross-genre events such as 2003’s Big Read which, through its partnership with 4,200 public libraries and affiliated reading schemes, had a wider impact on audiences than viewer ratings can determine.

8.3 In responding to the Society’s survey, more members offered criticism of programme content than on any other subject. One member articulated the views of many in commenting: ‘I believe that the quality of BBC TV programmes has deteriorated considerably, sacrificing quality for current populist approach and quality for profit. Frivolous, mind-numbing reality programmes do nothing to raise the status of the BBC.’

8.4 Many members remarked that BBC TV has dumbed down to chase ratings, and that it was patronising to pander to the lowest common denominator. Most thought that the BBC should reinstate Reithian values, have a global emphasis, but that first and foremost it should define our cultural and national identity in all its diversity.

8.5 When asked whether they believe that the BBC has become a ratings chaser at the cost of the quality of its output, 89% of those responding agreed (48.5% strongly, 40.5% mildly), while only 3% disagreed (1% strongly, 2% mildly), with 8% having no opinion on the issue.

***It is recommended that the BBC should be required to establish new methods of measuring and evaluating audience appreciation which are more appropriate than ratings to a strengthened public service broadcasting remit.***

## **9. The BBC and Comprehensive Programming**

9.1 There is a perception that the BBC, while successfully catering for the mass audience, no longer meets the needs of specialist audiences. The BBC claims to ‘provide something of value for everyone who pays the licence fee.’ But it is not clear who sets the standard. Categories such as music and arts, children’s programmes, specialist drama and investigative current affairs have been all but swept away from the main national channels, or marginalized to the outer edges (such as the digital channel BBC4 which achieves minimal reach). Attempts to reflect Britain’s cultural diversity on BBC TV seem inadequate.

9.2 Unlike radio, there are no longer any designated strands for specialist programmes on television to encourage and instil a regular habit of tuning in (e.g. *The Wednesday Play*, *Omnibus*, *Arena* or the Sunday drama serial for children). All too often, films and programmes which would appeal to family audiences are shown in the middle of the night or on digital channels.

9.3 The BBC used to believe that there need be only a very fine line between education and entertainment; that any well made programme, whether it be Morecombe and Wise bringing laughter to millions of homes, A.J.P. Taylor talking direct to camera about history, or Boulez explaining contemporary music, was entertaining as well as informative. In turning its back on this approach, BBC management seems to have discarded those voices prepared to uphold the case for good taste, or to argue for the BBC being the gold standard for seeking out the best of national talent and cultural heritage. Commissioning in the area of children’s programmes and the arts has withered, and many of the finest producers in these fields have had to go abroad to seek work, reducing the pool of quality programme makers.

9.4 The publication *The BBC: Some Facts and Figures* claims that there is more factual, arts and religious programming on BBC One today than a decade ago: (1581 hours in 2003 compared to 1135 hours in 1993), but 1993 was a time when output had diminished to a very low base.

9.5 The independent sub-committees which used to exist to monitor the performance of individual subject areas have been disbanded, and there is no requirement at present to put on programmes of a factual or educational nature in the arts, music or religions, or children’s programmes, on terrestrial and digital channels.

9.6 BBC4 is heralded as the channel fulfilling many of these interests, but so far it is watched by only 50,000-90,000 people. At present, therefore, BBC4 programming is of only minimal significance in meeting the BBC’s claims that it is delivering specialist programmes. If the BBC cares about *all* its licence fee payers, programmes of excellence should continue to be transmitted on BBC1 until such time as BBC4 and the other digital channels are universally

available and can be seen to offer a genuine choice to viewers. ‘Comprehensive programming’ should not mean that only programmes with the largest audience get the prime slots.

9.7 When questioned, 91% of members responding agreed that the BBC should aim to provide comprehensive programming, covering the widest spectrum of national, regional, local and specialist interest audiences. (75% strongly, 16% mildly), 4% neither agreed nor disagreed, 5% disagreed (2% strongly, 3% mildly).

***It is recommended that the BBC should be required to provide television and radio programming covering the widest spectrum of international, national, regional, local, cultural, specialist and minority interest audiences.***

## **10. Impartiality, Balance and Fairness in News**

10.1 Throughout the Second World War, and for at least four decades following it, the voice of the BBC was for much of the world’s population synonymous with the unvarnished truth. So consistently high was the BBC’s reputation, that in many parts of the world people literally risked their lives in order to tune in to London for a balanced account of events, untainted by propaganda and partial opinion.

10.2 It is clear from the statements and views expressed over recent years by BBC staff, managers and Governors, that the Corporation as a whole adheres as firmly as ever to the principles of truth, impartiality, balance and fairness that underlay its news and information output in earlier years. There has, however, in more recent times developed among segments of the BBC’s audiences, both at home and abroad, the conviction that the BBC has consistently been falling short of achieving the high standards it sets itself.

10.3 Those who perceive these inadequacies often find it difficult to pinpoint when and how the problems began to emerge. One charge levelled at the news and current affairs output is the blurring of the clear earlier distinction maintained by the BBC between news and comment. Fact and opinion, it is charged, are too often presented together, and the audience has difficulty in distinguishing what occurred from the reporter’s opinion of, or gloss on, what occurred. It was a rigid separation of the two in earlier days (the news bulletin that was fact and only fact) that helped establish the BBC’s reputation in this field.

10.4 In addition, often quoted is the charge that over the 1990s a sort of generally accepted ‘political correctness’ slowly developed among reporters, staff and management, which began to affect the totality of the BBC’s news and current affairs output. It was not that there was a conscious effort to put bias or a particular gloss on certain issues, but nonetheless that was the result – and the effects were catastrophic in terms of providing the BBC’s viewing and listening audiences with impartial, balanced and fair accounts of news and current events.

10.5 The recent Hutton Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly exposed, in a particular strand of BBC news and current affairs, problems running from the reporter at the microphone up to the Board of Governors. The Chairman and the Director General accepted these findings, resigned and instituted internal investigations designed to remedy the faults identified.

10.6 One issue recently discussed at some length is whether it remains viable for the Board of Governors to represent both the public to the BBC and the BBC to the public. We did not canvass members' views on this topic but there seems to be a general consensus that some changes are needed.

10.7 Members of the Society of Authors were asked whether the BBC should be required to adhere to the highest standards of impartiality, balance and fairness in communicating news and information to the public. In short, should the BBC's long-held aspiration to achieving high standards be reinforced by a positive requirement on the Corporation to adhere to them? The implication of the question was clearly to suggest that, into the obligations laid on the BBC in the new Charter, some mechanism be incorporated which monitors achievement in this area and is capable of demanding higher standards if a falling away is perceived.

10.8 A total of 98% of members responding agreed (94% strongly, 4% mildly) with this proposition. Only 1.5% disagreed with 0.5% holding no firm opinion.

***It is recommended that the BBC should be required to adhere to the highest standards of impartiality, balance and fairness in communicating news and information to the public. Some mechanism should be incorporated into the obligations laid on the Corporation that is capable of monitoring achievement in this area, and of demanding higher standards if a falling away is perceived.***

## **11. Dealings with contributors**

11.1 As a pioneer of radio and television in this country and world wide, the BBC once experienced both a need and a responsibility for the training and development of staff. BBC specialist departments became famous throughout the industry for the quality of their training and the talents of their workers. A BBC apprenticeship was once regarded as the finest training route into the media professions.

11.2 The BBC 'internal market', the decision to contract-out many key trades, the wholesale surrender of the BBC training schools, and the use of independent producers, have each in some ways been detrimental to the BBC. The shift from internally trained, full-time staff to part-time or contract staff has, along with a quota for independent production, led to an unwieldy and uneconomic bureaucracy with some BBC trained personnel exporting themselves and their skills.

11.3 It is widely believed in the broadcasting industry that the BBC's status as a world leader should be reflected in the high quality of treatment of its contributors and employees. Yet comments from Society members included complaints of poor treatment. Reports included difficulties with receiving contracts and being paid in a timely fashion, as well as claims that respondents were not being paid or even credited for contributing to research or for giving interviews as consultants. There was a belief among some that the corporation had a policy of using cheaper and more inexperienced staff, and that it failed adequately to nurture talent among existing staff. A perceived 'dumbing down' of broadcast programmes was considered by some to be a consequence of this policy. Some believed there was too much bureaucracy with too many involved in middle management. Some felt that the ratio of executives to programme makers had been out of kilter, and much-repeated was the view that the commissioning system was a 'disaster'.

11.4 99% of members responding to this issue agreed that the BBC should be required to foster the highest standards in its dealings with contributors, and to review its practices regularly to ensure they reflect those standards (93% strongly, 6% mildly), 0.5% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 0.5% disagreed mildly or strongly.

***It is recommended that as the BBC's output depends critically on the talents and training of its contributors and employees, it should be required to foster the highest standards in its dealings with them.***

## **12. The BBC's Commercial Activities**

12.1 The BBC has always had a commercial arm. At its inception in 1922 as the British Broadcasting Company, it traded as a commercial organisation for five years before its first charter was granted in 1927. The first copy of the *Radio Times* appeared in the 1920s and carried advertisements on several of its pages.

12.2 The BBC has over the years entered into commercial arrangements with many private companies including its apparent rivals BSKYB and ITV. The BBC also enters into co-production deals which mean the BBC brand is seen through the world in exchange for certain artistic compromises.

12.3 It is through BBC Worldwide, however, that the main distribution and further exploitation of BBC programmes both at home and abroad is conducted. BBC Worldwide provides additional income for creators and contributors as well as arising, from its sales activities, additional funding for future BBC programming.

12.4 Members have expressed concern that the BBC's commercial arm might be interfering in the commissioning process for the public-service-financed home channels. One respondent noted that BBC Worldwide was 'influencing programming. A concept that had less artistic merit but more marketing possibilities would be commissioned in favour of one that had merit but no affiliated merchandising.'

12.5 By investing in specific programmes ahead of production, Worldwide can exert undue influence on the choice of material, writer, cast and quality of production. BBC Worldwide's remit is to exploit secondary markets and not to exert influence over the quality of what is seen and heard on the channels funded by the licence. This possible conflict of interest arises when the public service remit is put to one side in exchange for extra budget from Worldwide, on condition that changes are made in the programme to make it more saleable in foreign markets (by casting an American actor in the role of a British detective, for example).

12.6 The fact that slots for TV comedy and drama used to be 30, 60 and 90 minutes long, and that scripts are now commissioned at 27, 54 and 81 minutes is testament to such interference. The other three per 30 minutes leave space for commercials in foreign markets, even though the BBC does not officially screen commercials. Even in the home market, programming sold to UK Gold, Granada Plus etc carries advertising inserted into BBC programmes.

12.7 Several respondents felt that it was essential that the BBC does not abuse its strong position in the marketplace; particularly in so-called 'arm's length deals' where the BBC finds itself

both the buyer and the seller of programming. These deals are monitored and must continue to be so. BBC Worldwide should not abuse its quasi-monopoly position when negotiating secondary rights particularly on radio dramas chosen for release on CDs and cassettes. The taking of authors' rights in return for take it or leave it small percentages is not to be accepted.

12.8 Members were put the following proposition: The BBC augments its income by publishing, marketing and sales through BBC Worldwide, under strict rules. It should be allowed to continue these commercial activities. The majority view among members of the Society is that the BBC should continue to foster these commercial activities. 92.5% agreed with the proposition (68% strongly, 24.5% mildly). Only 4.5% opposed it (2.5% strongly, 2% mildly). 3% did not express a view.

***It is recommended that the BBC should continue to be permitted to augment its income by publishing, marketing and sales through BBC Worldwide under strict rules that protect the interests of its home audiences and the rights of contributors to its programmes.***

### **13. Development of Digital and Online Broadcasting**

13.1 The BBC has a long tradition of pioneering technological innovations in British broadcasting, from satellite transmissions to Nicam stereo. With five new free-to-view digital TV stations, seven digital radio stations and BBCi - its much-admired online service - the BBC has risen magnificently to the challenge of recent technological advances. The Society particularly welcomes the new digital radio channel, BBC7, which makes such excellent use of the BBC's radio archives, and encourages further public access to the BBC's archives.

13.2 At the end of 2010, Britain's analogue system is to be switched off. The switchover will be gradual, beginning as early as 2007. However, viewers who have not yet invested in a digital adaptor, or who live in areas where there is still no digital coverage, are paying a full licence fee but cannot enjoy the benefits of BBC's new free-to-view TV stations which are broadcasting some of the BBC's most innovative programmes. For those who do have digital adaptors, it is not easy to discover what programmes are being broadcast on the digital channels, nor to find any detailed information on them. As with Nicam stereo, which does not function properly in densely built-up areas, digital reception is often poor in quality when there are high buildings nearby or mobile telephone masts. Most digital adaptors are not equipped to work with television sets that predate the introduction of the scart plug, which will make many sets obsolete, particularly affecting older viewers and viewers on low income.

13.3 In commenting on these matters, a number of members regarded BBCi as exemplary, widely used abroad and full of information. The launch of BBC's digital curriculum service planned in 2006 is a venture welcomed by educators, parents and children alike, but one respondent voiced a concern about how quality would be guaranteed in the absence of competition. Another thought that BBCi should be a supplementary rather than a primary service. Many felt that the BBC's investment in digital channels and the internet siphons off money that should be allocated to the analogue channels, and some resented being forced to switch to digital television to see programmes that should have been showcased on BBC2 rather than on BBC3 or BBC4, and thought the crossover periods were too long. The most controversial issue for the Society's members was whether licence fee payers should be funding services which are not available to all

UK owners of television sets and which, in other cases, are of significant benefit to Internet users abroad.

13.4 One member wrote: ‘The quality of programming on mainline stations is diluted by the need to attract viewers to its digital services which few can receive.’ Another: ‘The BBC should be enabled and encouraged to foster innovation. When the private sector innovated cable and satellite it did it with sports and schlock and lost forever the middlebrow/highbrow.’

13.5 When asked specifically whether the BBC should take a lead in the development of digital and online broadcasting, 64% of respondents were in agreement (36% strongly and 28% mildly), while 11% disagreed (5% strongly, 6% mildly). 25% neither agreed nor disagreed.

***It is recommended that the BBC should be required to encourage development of, and facilitate access to, both digital and online broadcasting, and that there should be 100% UK coverage for free-to-view digital television as rapidly as possible, and well before the proposed analogue switch-off at the end of 2010.***