



Arts Council England's response to the independent review of the BBC's digital television services

The context for our response

Arts Council England welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the independent review of the BBC's digital television services. We are not commenting on CBeebies or CBBC. We have limited our responses to BBC 4 and BBC 3 where we are commenting on the delivery of the channels' remit for arts and cultural programming.

Introduction

Arts Council England welcomes the introduction of the BBC's digital television channels. In general the programming has been of high quality and distinction. BBC 4 and BBC 3 have undoubtedly broadened the range of cultural programming available. They have pioneered new ways of making programmes and established new partnerships. Both channels are enabling the BBC to inform, educate and entertain audiences in new ways. We would agree with the BBC's Board of Governors that there is evidence to show that the services have made a significant contribution to digital take-up.

Both BBC 4 and BBC 3 have taken on their remit to experiment and take risk, both with production methods and programme content. This is welcomed. They have also experimented with various forms of interactivity. We welcome this initiative to engage with audiences beyond the transmission of the single television programme. We would encourage both channels to develop this further and develop the BBC's emerging policy of 'Beyond the Broadcast'.

These are early days and while congratulating the BBC on a strong start there is an opportunity for both review and development. While BBC 4 has a distinct remit

and appears to have found a distinct audience, the remit of BBC 3 remains, in our view, unclear.

The following comments are intended as positive encouragement, highlighting opportunities for the channels to build their profile and deliver their remit over the coming years.

BBC 4

BBC 4 launched in March 2002 with a clear ambition to contribute to the cultural life of the country both on and off screen and to deliver an international perspective to its audience. It should be congratulated on having, to a great extent, delivered that remit in its first two years.

Since its launch BBC 4 has involved some of the best British artists in the development of the channel. It has forged partnerships with a number of artists and cultural organisations. The amount of performance in music and theatre has been impressive. In terms of factual cultural programming BBC 4 has given its audience what it promised – ‘a place to think’.

In the two years it has been with us its small audience has grown, it has won a number of major UK and international awards. It has had high coverage (previews and reviews) in the press.

Music

The regular Saturday night slot of music performance has been welcome. The Channel has provided extended coverage of the BBC Proms and of BBC Young Musician of the Year. Partnerships have been struck with the Royal Opera House – live transmissions of *Sophie's Choice* and *The Tempest* have been highlights. We would encourage BBC 4 to extend its partnerships beyond our largest music organisation. *Fidelio* from Birmingham Opera was almost unique outside London coverage. Opera North and its new ‘bite size’ operas are just one example of other potential partnerships.

The expansion in non-classical music has been a major success for the channel. It has covered a diverse range of music from world to folk and jazz. Coverage has

been international and from across the UK with events such as Cambridge Folk Festival, Brecon Jazz and WOMAD.

Dance

Dance has been sadly absent from BBC 4, which is surprising given the art forms popularity with young audiences, its connections with popular culture and its ability to cross boundaries within the arts and with audiences. The absence has been particularly apparent as BBC 2 no longer seems to give any airtime to dance.

Visual Arts

BBC 4 opened with a series on contemporary British artists. Since then it has established a limited number of partnerships with UK art galleries. These are welcome but we would have expected more given the popularity of the visual arts these days. The partnership with Becks Futures is a strong statement of BBC 4's role as patron. And the channel's involvement with awards such as the Gulbenkian Museums prize and Designer of the Year are welcome. Nevertheless channel FIVE remains a strong competitor here having captured the partnerships with the Blockbuster art exhibitions and giving a regular slot to visual arts coverage.

Theatre/Drama

BBC 4 has extended the BBC's coverage of theatre and transferred a number of productions to the small screen. This is very welcome. Until the birth of BBC 4 the BBC's coverage of theatre was negligible to the point of negligence. We welcome BBC 4 working with producers in both the commercial and subsidised sectors and would encourage them to look well beyond London for their coverage. The quality of work in our regional theatres is at an all time high.

The commissioning of new drama for BBC 4 and the use of new low budget production techniques has been a real achievement. *The Alan Clark Diaries* were a transformational moment for the channel with the brave use of a major advertising campaign. The series showed that there was a wider audience to this small digital channel – and a million of them came.

Literature

The channel started with a run of the *Writers and Readers Roadshows*. This was very low-budget programming but nevertheless welcome. No other channel gave regular coverage to reading at the time. To our knowledge the roadshows have

now finished. It is surprising that BBC 4, since the end of *The Big Read*, has no regular programme for readers given the popularity of reading and the rise of the book club. We welcome the rise of *Richard and Judy's* book programme on independent television but BBC 4 could provide a welcome complement to this.

Film

The regular Saturday Cinema slot is welcome. The small number of foreign language films has increased BBC's output in this area by 100 per cent. The World Cinema Award is a welcome initiative.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT ON BBC 4

We encourage BBC 4 to develop a broader reach

- BBC 4 has done well in targeting its initial core audience. Our understanding is that its audience grew by half last year – but that only took it from 0.22 per cent to 0.33 per cent. Ratings should not and cannot be the driver for BBC 4 it needs to develop a better strategy for encouraging the audience that has yet to make the transfer to digital television. Its audience currently remains resolutely ABC1. More partnerships with BBC 2 could encourage this.
- We encourage BBC 4 to do more to attract geographically diverse viewers. Their audience is currently pretty heavily skewed towards the South of England.
- We encourage BBC 4 to do more in terms of cultural diversity. The channel has a strong international and multicultural agenda and is particularly strong in world music and some aspects of theatre (for example, *Elmina's Kitchen*). However, the face (in terms of presenters and voice-overs) and tone remains largely white in cultural programmes – with the exception of the strong and lively presence of Andrea Oliver on non-classical music programmes.
- We encourage BBC 4 to become more international. Music coverage has a strong international flavour but beyond that access to other cultures is more limited. World cinema has a presence but with only 2 foreign language films a week it is a limited one. The World Cinema Award has been a welcome initiative.

- We encourage BBC 4 to build more partnerships with cultural organisations across the country. Arts Council England would welcome the opportunity to work with BBC in order to provide access to content and to broker partnerships with artists and arts organisations.
- We encourage BBC 4 to develop more partnerships with artists – commissioning work from artists of all kinds. Animation, dance, new media, moving image and interactive work can be commissioned at relatively low cost. This is an area in which BBC 4 could build its brand as patron.

We encourage BBC 4 do develop more in-depth programming

- We encourage BBC 4 to invest in more major series. Since its launch in March 2002 with a series on Young British Artists investment appears to have been more in one-off programmes rather than series. Series allow audiences to explore ideas in more depth; they also provide anchors in the schedule and are an incentive to first time BBC 4 viewers to return to the channel.
- We encourage BBC 4 to invest in in-depth one-to-one interviews with artists of all kinds. Terrestrial schedules no longer give space to in-depth conversation. This should be part of BBC 4's distinctive contribution. It also builds an archive of voices of the artists who shaped the 20th and are shaping the 21st centuries. We believe the BBC has the responsibility to be an archivist for the nation. BBC 4 currently invests in only one hour a week of discussion or interview in its factual programming.

We encourage BBC 4 to continue in its role as talent spotter

- BBC 4 has been good at spotting new performance to bring to the screen. It has brought us front row seats for performances as diverse as *The Tempest* from the Royal Opera House, *Richard II* from The Globe and *Round the Horn Revisited* and *Elmina's Kitchen* from the National Theatre. This should continue and BBC 4 should look beyond London for its transfers to the screen.

- BBC 4 should develop on-screen talent. Few new presenters have emerged in the first two years of BBC 4. Andrea Oliver has been a great new face for the world music coverage and Kate Moss fronted the *Writers and Readers Roadshows*. BBC 4 is relatively safe ground to develop communicators on the arts and cultural and the channel should relish the opportunity.

We encourage BBC 4 to help audiences navigate its schedule

While BBC 4, the channel, has a distinct personality, the schedule remains more difficult to read. This is partly because of the way digital listings are written in the national press. BBC 4 programmes get a high number of previews but the main listings for BBC 4 as for all digital channels are very limited in the information they convey. Given the digital take-up this needs to change.

On BBC 4 itself, the lack of series makes the schedule difficult to navigate or 'make a date' with. Too often good (even great) programmes are found by happenstance rather than design. While we recognise there is a limit to the amount of cross trailing or media advertising that can be done (*The Alan Clark Diaries* are the exception rather than the rule), we would encourage more cross trailing both on television and on radio.

We encourage BBC 4 to explore the possibility of expanding its hours of transmission

- Given the increasing flexible patterns of people's lives, we would encourage BBC 4 to look at some earlier start times or later finishes. We recognise that there is a cost involved but strategic use of repeats and acknowledgement of 'special events' could allow this to happen.

BBC 3

BBC 3 had a slow start but appears to be beginning to build a loyal audience. The audience (30-34 year olds, skewed to ABC1s) is slightly older than one might have expected for the channel. While its range of programming is impressive with the mix of factual programming and original domestic drama and entertainment, its heavy focus on celebrity and relentless lifestyle content means that it has more

cross over with its competitor channels than other BBC digital channels. That said, we welcome BBC 3's innovative and risk-taking approach and acknowledge that achieving that within a public service channel is not easy.

BBC 3 has scheduled programming from other BBC channels more consistently than BBC 4. This has undoubtedly brought new viewers to the channel but it has also meant that the channel has sometimes felt cluttered with programming that is not BBC 3 originated.

Although we have some concerns about the distinctiveness of the channel there have been some notable areas of innovation, which deserve credit. It has made **animation** a hallmark of the channel with series such as *Angry Kid* and *Monkey Dust*. We welcome this engagement with new animation and writing talent.

BBC 3 has also made an impact with its original **drama, which** has been both challenging and innovative in its format. Again we welcome the engagement with new talent. We also welcome the fact that most of BBC 3's drama is set outside of the capital and has included a wide range of culturally diverse characters and settings.

Music and Arts

We note that BBC 3 has a commitment to show 'at least 50 hours of new music and arts programming a year...giving a sense of what it feels like to be British in the early 21st century.'

We understand that BBC 3 has in fact exceeded this level of commitment, which is to be congratulated. However, we have found the arts programming some times hard to find. This may be simply because it doesn't have a regular place in the schedule. We recognise that regular scheduling may not be the best way to attract the BBC 3 target audience. We'd welcome some more cross trailing.

The music programming has been well trailed and music is indeed part of the brand of the channel.

BBC 3 appears to have made more use of presenters than BBC 4. It has also had a greater commitment to series as opposed to simply one-off programmes. We believe that this is likely to anchor new audiences in the schedule. It has also

meant the channel has had some consistently good previews and reviews in a wide range of newspapers.

Trevor Nelson was an engaging and informed presenter of a music series on urban culture. The series on architecture and design, *Dreamspaces*, was presenter led and has recently used leading contemporary artists such as the architect David Adjaye and the musician Justine Frischmann to front the programmes.

We welcome the initiative to introduce poetry on BBC 3 with *Whine Gums*. We hope it will continue to keep poetry in the schedule. Live literature and poetry has an increasing audience, particularly among young people.

We welcomed the channel's *Art in the City* series. We acknowledge that BBC 3 has a predominately British remit but this foray into the arts in European cities and New York gave some welcome perspective.

Arts Council England would welcome the opportunity to work with BBC 3 to broker partnerships with emerging British writers and artists.

Conclusion

We welcome the arrival of the BBC's digital television channels. We look forward to their development in the coming years. We would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with BBC 3 and BBC 4.