

Mediawatch-uk

A response to the BBC's paper, issued June 2001, entitled:

"THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE BBC'S PROPOSED NEW SERVICES AND THEIR ROLE IN DRIVING DIGITAL TAKE-UP"

In this paper the BBC describes in further detail its proposals for a range of new television and radio services enabled by the development of digital broadcasting technology.

The new television services are clearly calculated to complement existing services and to offer additional BBC Channels to the viewing public. The new channels proposed are aimed at competing with and offering alternatives to channels offered by other digital providers.

The rationale, which, has not been substantiated in the BBC's paper, is that the provision of additional channels provided by the BBC will, in itself, accelerate digital take-up.

Whilst the paper provides useful information on digital penetration it does not analyse the proportion of the total audience currently viewing digital channels provided by itself or by others.

One of the criticisms not addressed has been the relatively poor audience figures for BBC News 24, BBC Choice and BBC Knowledge. There are no evident guarantees that BBC Three and BBC Four, simply by being re-branded, will attract anything other than "niche" audiences and yet considerable investment is proposed for new programming for these new digital channels.

Although the paper recognises that other providers are already established it fails to reassure that the new services will be sustainable. No budgetary figures are provided showing the proportion of licence fee money needed to fund the new Digital Services. Although new programming is promised nothing is said about new programming for existing BBC TV Services which continue to be used by the majority of licence fee payers. These seem to be dominated by relatively low budget, predictable programming (soaps, DIY, gardening, cookery, "fly on the wall" with a proportion of repeated films or dramas). There are of course recent exceptions like the 'Murder in Mind' drama series, 'Jazz' a new retrospective on the history of Jazz,

'Steve Leonard's Ultimate Killers', the world's most efficient predators, *'Celeb at Work'*, celebrities give up their day jobs and the crime drama *'Waking the Dead'*, about a police unit tackling unsolved crimes, all showing on BBC TV.

Bearing in mind that the majority of households already receive only BBC1 and BBC 2 TV, investment in new programming surely ought to serve those licence fee payers first.

The notion that digital take up needs to be accelerated simply because it serves the objectives of the BBC and the wider industrial interests, and that existing analogue viewers must be enticed to change to digital is hardly a "service" to the public. Since the development of digital television the broadcasting industry has done very little to acquaint viewers and listeners with the supposed benefits and advantages of the technology. (One notable exception is the BBC's interactive coverage of the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament this year demonstrating very effectively what the technology offers.) The industry must, therefore, take a large share of the blame for the public inertia which is evident and which these new channels are calculated to overcome.

The paper also fails to acknowledge that there are costs involved in switching to digital. Currently this is a one-off cost of £100.00 for dish installation and the provision of a free decoder although the additional channels available are without subscription. Other subsidised deals on installation are currently available provided a subscription, scaled according to the package chosen, is made to SKY Digital. However, these deals are not permanent and are subject to withdrawal at any time.

A central flaw in the paper is that it is not established that the main target group (under 35s) has sufficient brand loyalty and is prepared to pay the ever-increasing licence fee, which funds only the BBC. It is especially important to establish this since other providers are also targeting the same age group with already popular dedicated film and sport channels.

The BBC does not seem to have done broadly based research among the target audience to establish that BBC Three and BBC Four are the sort of channels that would be generally viewed in preference to channels provided by others. The proposed channels are already a late entry into a very competitive digital market place.

BBC Four, as outlined, is a particularly ambitious proposal with lofty ideals. Bearing in mind that "the arts" are highly subjective and often controversial - especially when it is "experimental" - being a "patron of the arts" may well lead the BBC into difficulties when explaining how licence fee money is expended.

Experience gained so far in the Digital Age has not shown that more channels mean more real choices in entertainment. Digital TV has certainly brought

alternative viewing but many channels offer opportunities to view the same programmes at different times and/or days and other channels offer repeats of old, but popular, programmes from the past.

The BBC's paper does not address the central problem that viewers and listeners have a limit to the amount of time available to view television and/or listen to the radio.

It is evident from the BBC's paper that the Children's Channel is aiming to complement the education system and, presumably, the '**National Grid for Learning**'. This again is a lofty aim and it would be helpful to know how much it will cost and why such a new TV channel is thought necessary given that the BBC has diverted significant resources into BBC On-Line. All schools, primary and secondary, are now connected to the Internet and students can readily log on to the vast resource material that is available. In these circumstances it is not clear what real advantages would accrue from an additional television channel, funded by the licence fee, devoted entirely to children.

So far as music policy is concerned it seems that Network X is starting from a limited perspective. There is no explanation as to why it is thought that the existing National and Local BBC Radio Services are not adequately serving the country as a whole. Why is "black music" singled out as being a current deficiency? There is no explanation as to why the BBC thinks it is necessary to identify "the needs of the target audience".

Generally the prospectus offered by Network X is clearly aimed to broaden the musical agenda currently on offer from existing BBC Radio services but no explanation of why these services cannot be more inclusive. The agenda for speech content on Network X seems very narrow.

So far as Network Y is concerned it is clearly aimed to have a broad appeal and could be said, perhaps, to highlight perceived shortcomings of Radio 2.

However, neither proposal recognises that there is a very substantial market for pre-recorded music readily available on CD and cassette. Few households do not have the facilities to play pre-recorded music enabling the established exercise of real, personal choices and preferences to which we have all become accustomed.

The prospectus for Network Z could also be said to highlight the shortcomings of BBC Radio 4 and 5.

The paper from the BBC also fails to acknowledge the relative prosperity enjoyed by a substantial proportion of the population which brings with it opportunities for activities and pursuits which are not media related. Much more should be done to assess the demand and/or need for more Television and Radio channels.

CONCLUSIONS

mediawatch-uk welcomes the proposals set out by the BBC but we believe we have identified areas where further clarification, analysis and justification is needed. Whilst we do not wish to be wholly negative about the BBC's aspirations much more must be done to demonstrate that there is a real need for the proposed TV and Radio channels.

mediawatch-uk does not dispute that a case can be made to extend public service broadcasting. This should not be done simply to enhance the prestige of the BBC. There is undoubtedly force to the argument that by extending its services there could be an overall impoverishment of BBC output as a result of these proposals. Unless licence fee income is substantially increased it is plain that revenue currently available will have to be spread more thinly across the new and existing BBC services. It is not demonstrated that such an increase in the licence fee is either politically acceptable or would be greeted with public acclaim.

We repeat our suggestion, set out fully in 'Funding The BBC', published in March 1999, (see: www.mediawatchuk.org/publications) that the abundant proceeds of the National Lottery, which is promoted extensively by the BBC, could be a source of additional income. The BBC clearly has aspirations to be a cultural force and could certainly be regarded as a "good cause" which could be said to benefit every household in the land.

Otherwise, as with any new service, the amount of licence fee revenue should, perhaps, be proportionate to the likely audience share.

We urge the Secretary of State and the Culture Select Committee to seek detailed answers and assurances to the questions and doubts expressed above from the Governors and management of the BBC before sanctioning these ambitious proposals.

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