

Response to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport Review of the BBC's Royal Charter, 'A Strong BBC, independent of government' (March 2005)

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Preamble:

Monday 23 May 2005 saw widespread strike action in the BBC, severely limiting the output of live broadcasts that day. Further action is promised. Staff are angered by 4000 compulsory redundancies and outsourcing recently announced by director Mark Thompson. While Stephen Dando, director of BBC people, says the strikers' demands 'are not demands that any responsible employer could meet in this day and age', more than 80% of union members voted to strike, with 64% of ballot papers returned. ['Plans are laid for strike day', *Ariel*, 17 May 2005.]

In addition to the redundancies, the backdrop to the industrial action consists of proposals to shift parts of production to 'the regions', primarily Manchester, and the review of the BBC's Royal Charter. Speculation exists that the difference in the management styles of Thompson and his relatively popular predecessor Greg Dyke has sharpened the conflict. Yet these immediate economic issues are informed by shifts and uncertainties concerning the role of the BBC in contemporary Britain. The recent charter review embodies many of these trends, while offering a range of suggestions as to the Corporation's future and that of public service broadcasting (PSB).

The fetish of independence

From its title onwards, the DCMS Green Paper promotes the independence of the BBC. Yet even a cursory glance at the documentation shows this to be at best compromised, at worst a myth. The licence fee, that peculiar funding arrangement prompting the sort of soul-searching that must seem indulgent to low cost digital and cable channels, makes the BBC reliant on the state for enforcement and collection (p59). It is not Broadcasting House or the public service ethos but the threat of fines and imprisonment that makes, for example, the National Debtline advise its clients to pay the TV licence as a top priority [*Dealing With Your Debts*, p10 and *passim*].

Furthermore, the Green Paper indicates that Ofcom compliance will shape the BBC's response to the switch to digital switchover, also subject to 'Switchco' regulation (p52), as part of 'Building digital Britain' (p47). The independence of the World Service is more questionable still, since Government funding and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) supervision of 'public diplomacy' – 'work which aims at influencing in a positive way the perceptions of individuals and organisations overseas about the UK' (pp43-45) – remain the norm. This is without mentioning the historical examples, from the 1926 General Strike to the present day, of the Corporation supplying its critics with reasons to doubt claims of 'due impartiality' (despite an historical synopsis claiming the BBC independence has been constant, with the possible exception of the Second World War, pp 105-110).

In short, the state is central to the existence of the BBC, as is conceded half way through the Green Paper: 'The Government also has a role in BBC governance – it conducts the Charter Review every ten years or so, signs the Agreement and can propose amendments to it. Any launch of a new publicly-funded [sic] service requires the approval of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, following public consultation and formal advice from Ofcom on the likely market impact. The Secretary of State can impose conditions on such approvals' (p66).

Of the public, the Green Paper observes that we distrust our (recently) elected representatives and their predecessors, and therefore desire that they avoid involvement in broadcasting. In contrast, it is suggested, the peculiar institutional arrangements that underpin the BBC guarantee public trust. Thus Ofcom research indicating that 'people wanted the government kept out of television' is cited approvingly (p60), although they could indicate political disenchantment as much as support for PSB. These perceptions are treated as fixed, but the BBC would benefit from coming clean about its real dependence on the state and its direct links with the Home Office and FCO. The public could then assess the content of news and entertainment output without the illusion of independence clouding our judgement. Moreover, if the BBC were truly independent, the DCMS could back off entirely and cease attempting to influence its future direction. Protests about the possible 'confusion of responsibilities' arising from forms of regulation popular today, including Ofcom (p70), evade the central issue of the BBC as a state broadcaster. 'Ultimate power under the current arrangements rests with the Government' concedes Annex B (p111). Quite: own up, drop the fetish of independence and move on.

The capital and the regions

'Every region of the UK pays for the BBC. It therefore has a responsibility to spread itself outside London' (p82). Even ignoring the issue of redundancies, the emphasis on shifting production out of London on principle is bizarre. Clearly some of the BBC's output, such as CBeebies, is not location-specific and could be relocated with minimal disruption to programming. This is largely a technical and administrative question; many parents would welcome the time and effort being spent on content, so that the countless repeats could be replaced with something matching the innovative website. [See Kathryn Flett, 'Everyone's a critic - including my three-year-old', *The Observer* 22 May 2005, <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,1489282,00.html>] But for other BBC output, a base in the capital city is ideal, given that London is likely to remain both the centre of events and a key source of production personnel for some time to come. A thriving city is a pleasant working environment for those who want it. In contrast, a geographical move driven by the opinions of viewers, who 'often feel that the BBC is remote, too metropolitan' (p2) makes little sense: better to address viewer desires through programme content. In the impending digital age – warmly welcomed elsewhere in the document – a preoccupation with the physical location of the Corporation is unnecessary. Few of the independent producers criticising the BBC for not working outside of the M25 would themselves willingly relocate to Skegness or Grimsby, so why should the BBC?

Deferring to viewers

In contrast to the unhelpful emphasis on independence and the regions, the Green Paper is extremely short on specifics. Instead of leading, in the patrician fashion of the BBC's founders, the DCMS takes its lead from the viewers themselves. 'They own the BBC and they pay its bills, so they, we decided, should call the shots' (ibid.). It appears that there is a fine line between PSB and basing policy around the whims of the public. This is clear from *BBC Charter Review: Qualitative Research on Key Issues*, the 2004 public consultation exercise conducted by Cragg Ross Dawson and others [http://www.bbccharterreview.org.uk/pdf_documents/greenpaper_research.pdf]. Elements of this document have been integrated into the Green Paper. The research findings have an oddly evangelical character at times. For instance, the report expresses disappointment that the public shows little interest in the governance of the BBC, and lists a series of technical changes to help demystify this process (p79). Few audience assumptions are quizzed in any detail: the public is seen as indifferent

to corporate governance, when the same information could be interpreted as meaning that the public have delegated responsibility to the professionals. The same self-scrutiny applied to the BBC's activities should be extended to the claims made by audience members involved in survey questionnaires. Many respondents seem list timeless homilies about too many repeats or too many middle class old men being in charge, rather than showing a close engagement with the issue of PSB. Like Lou falling for Andy's idle deceptions in *Little Britain*, all opinions are treated as having equal merit and drawn into the policy-making process itself.

The dilution of education

The classic formulation of the BBC's mission 'to educate' is diluted in the Green Paper. If education is important in its own right, regardless of economic imperatives, then this is the reason to maintain it. Most obviously, schools programming and the long-term collaboration with the Open University typify this approach. In less specific ways, BBC television contributes to the sum total of human knowledge and learning. This is acknowledged as 'encouraging informal learning through mainstream programming, particularly factual programming – engaging audiences in new issues and areas of interest', which the Green Paper correctly treats as distinct from the BBC's role in formal education (p35). Yet having established an informal role for the Corporation as a provider of tacit knowledge, it then proposes a 'set of performance measures ... including an element of independent scrutiny and an appropriate emphasis on measuring educational benefits'. Many in education, from primary school to university, equate such 'audit culture' with the stifling of initiative and the emptying out of real content. It would be unwise for a broadcaster to travel the same route, especially with something as loosely defined as informal learning from (mainly) factual programming.

Social engineering

The BBC should get out of the social engineering business. At times the Green Paper expresses unease with the idea of knowledge for its own sake, hence the professed need for audits. The confusion over how to provide education merges in unfortunate ways with the assumptions of the consultation exercises. The reliance on focus groups to shape future programme content expresses a profound uncertainty about what to show. Yet on questions such as citizenship or 'healthier lifestyles' (p35), a unitary outlook on these matters is taken for granted. A truly independent BBC would question the assumptions behind these themes, rather than take them for granted and compliment itself for integrating them into the schedules. The futurological acceptance of a multi-channel environment suggests that the BBC is going into the narrowcasting business rather than fighting for a broad public audience, so why not use this principle to emphasise quality programming? As viewers turn off high profile flops with 'celebrity' in the title in droves, why not trust us to watch something a little more challenging instead?

Focus groups

The audience itself becomes the ambivalent object of the Green Paper authors' desires. Sometimes our contradictory prejudices, as expressed to qualitative researchers, are taken as gospel. At other times we are the truculent loafers who refuse to take an interest in the governance of the BBC. Worst of all we end up cast in the role of vulnerable individuals, particularly older viewers (p53), unable to make sense of the shift to digital. This indecisive fudge helps no-one: our opinions are valued yet we are not to be trusted to draw our own conclusions unsupervised. Our apparent lack of knowledge, expressed in focus groups – '85% know nothing or little about how the corporation is run' (p82) – does not stop our advice being drawn on to help shape the response to other policy concerns. The key to PSB is to get on with making and showing the programmes that are important in their own right because

they are important in their own right: content must be king. The Green Paper acknowledges this in a fleeting comparison of BBC Radio Three with Classic FM: the latter is commercially viable because popular with listeners, therefore it can take care of itself (p91). Why not extend this principle to all programming, rather than rebranding the erstwhile Knowledge Channel as BBC4 and creating a highbrow ghetto? Audiences are quite capable of enjoying such material if they desire to. If you build it, we will come.

Public service broadcasting

The Green Paper alludes to the potential of a broadcaster not driven entirely by market forces and their televisual corollary, ratings. Thus training (p83) and help for those with sensory impairment (p90) are mentioned in passing as examples of what the BBC does well. Yet their significance is greater than this, as they show what can be done once the commercial imperative is removed. A genuine PSB service would deliver programming based on the principle that the programmes are worthwhile in themselves. Concerns with regional policy, bogus independence and corporate governance are a distraction from this. Where is the programme making? Just a handful of shows are actually mentioned by name in a 120-page document. Even the harping on the success of *Little Britain* so widespread in BBC press releases has disappeared. In the final analysis, successful quality broadcasts sustained by a confidence in their content and delivery are the best guarantee of the BBC's future.

About the Author

Graham Barnfield lectures in Journalism at the University of East London. A Fellow of the Wolfsonian-FIU, he has written widely on both reality television and on cultural policy in 1930s America, and has made numerous BBC Radio appearances in response to the 'happy slaps' craze. Also an affiliate editor of Reconstruction (<http://www.reconstruction.ws>), he writes a monthly column on film for *TES Extra New Teachers* and blogs at <http://loneliestjukebox.blogspot.com>. He lives in London and has one daughter.