

REBUILDING THE BBC FOR BRITAIN AND THE WORLD

A vision for the future

British Broadcasting Challenge



BRITISH
BROADCASTING
CHALLENGE



Table of Contents

A vision for the future	3
Summary of recommendations	4
Independence and legitimacy	5
Universality	6
A BBC funded fairly and at scale	8
A global BBC	10
Values-led technology	12
Appendix: Who we are	14

Rebuilding the BBC for Britain and the world

A vision for the future by the British Broadcasting Challenge

'Without facts you can't have truth. Without truth you can't have trust. Without all three we have no shared reality, and democracy - and all meaningful human endeavours - are dead.'

Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize lecture, 2021

The BBC is one of Britain's greatest institutions. Through its global reach and long-standing commitment to truth and impartiality the BBC stands as a global institutional bulwark against disinformation and misinformation in a fractured and uncertain information landscape.

The BBC must remain editorially independent, it must innovate, and it must be properly funded. These are essential conditions for the survival of the BBC which in turn is a vital institution in the battle to defend liberal democracy.

The BBC is a platform for the UK's myriad identities and cultures. It exercises soft power globally in defence of truth, integrity and trustworthiness. It serves us all as a communal public space, in the same way as the NHS and open green spaces.

We believe that a revitalised, properly funded, and independent BBC can flourish if its strengths and value to the nation are recognised by the government of the day. For too long, debates about the future of the BBC have instead focused on marginalising or weakening it.

We urgently need a genuine and constructive debate about how we can build on the BBC's historic remit to inform, educate and entertain, for the benefit of Britain and the world in the 21st century.

We believe this should be based on five principles:

Independence

Universal access

Fair funding at the necessary scale

Global reach

World class technology based on democratic values

Summary of recommendations

Independence and Legitimacy

- Reform of the charter renewal process to protect it from political interference
- A genuinely independent public appointments process for the chair and trustees which is insulated from covert and overt government influence
- Increase engagement with and accountability to the public, and transparency around decision-making and spending.

Editorial Independence and News

- Whole-hearted government support for the BBC's editorial independence, domestically and internationally, including well-directed investment to support both bbc.com and the World Service
- A strengthened BBC commitment to providing genuinely local news via broadcast channels, including local TV and radio as well as online, to address a growing democratic deficit
- The BBC must maintain news in prominent positions in its broadcast TV and radio schedules, and strengthen support for domestic and international current affairs reportage

Funding

- The nature of BBC funding and its level should be independently assessed according to three principles:
 - It should enable universal access to all BBC content
 - It should remedy the severity of previous cuts
 - It should contain a progressive element which takes into account levels of income inequality
- A wholly independent funding mechanism should be established to protect the BBC from further erosion, and from interference by future governments

Democracy and Diversity

- The BBC needs to ensure that it has production and decision-making centres in all parts of the UK, and that its producers and commissioners are drawn from the widest possible range of backgrounds and are truly representative of the UK audiences they serve
- The BBC should be tasked with an enhanced remit to counter misinformation and given the appropriate financial resources to protect our democracy from bad actors. This is essential to create a more informed and social media literate UK citizenry

Technical Innovation

- The BBC should continue to innovate technically, ensuring that it remains accessible to all and operates in the best interest of the British public.

Independence and Legitimacy

Overview

We face a crisis of misinformation and disinformation campaigns and live in an era of collapsing trust, so it is essential that all citizens have free access to accurate and impartial information and that new ways of reaching people with reliable information are explored. The BBC is trusted more than any other news source and is recognised for its editorial integrity, and long-standing commitment to impartial reporting.

The BBC is a national - not a state - broadcaster and plays a critical role in upholding democracy, both in the UK and globally. As an independent institution, it has a system of governance and accountability which can hold the powerful to account. But in recent years, it has been the victim of a sustained campaign to undermine its independence and legitimacy.

The BBC derives its constitutional status from a Royal Charter stating that 'the BBC is operationally and editorially independent of government'. This independence lies at the heart of the BBC's promise to the public but is challenged by the political influence that the government of the day can exert through the process of appointing the BBC chair, setting the terms for Charter renewal, and determining new funding levels

Legitimacy is the public's belief that the BBC - and its leadership - is operating in the best interest of the people it serves and who pay for it. The BBC's unique funding model relies on public trust and support: everyone pays the licence fee, so the BBC must be accountable equally to all citizens. A politically independent BBC is not automatically an institution with sufficient legitimacy since part of the public distrusts elite bureaucracies.

Recommendations

- Reform of the Charter renewal process to protect it from party politics
- A genuinely independent public appointments process for the chair and trustees, insulated from covert and overt government influence
- Increase engagement with, and accountability to, the public by setting up a permanent people's assembly, representative of the demographic breakdown of the country, to consider long-term strategic thinking
- Increase transparency around decision-making and spending - possibly by making the proceedings of a people's assembly open to the public
- Increase diversity in its programming and in the workforce so that the BBC better reflects the make-up of modern Britain

Universality

Overview

This is a foundational principle of the BBC and has been instrumental in the social glue which binds the nation together. A deep commitment to universality will ensure that the BBC remains a place where the nations, regions and communities of the UK are properly reflected back to each other, and then collectively shared with the rest of the world.

The BBC's universal principle of 'something of quality for everyone' becomes even more important as growing amounts of news, sport and entertainment are moved behind paywalls to streaming and subscription services. It must make programmes, whether they are news and current affairs, soaps, comedy, music, drama, or children's television, with a specifically British content and context which is lacking in US-based streamers. The BBC must also recognise that many vulnerable and economically deprived people do not have access to high-speed universal broadband and will continue to rely on free over-the-air transmission.

It is essential that the BBC delivers content that is attractive to large, mass audiences such as *Strictly*, *Eastenders*, and *Blue Planet* if it is to stay at the heart of national life. But it must also embrace content that speaks to minority and niche audiences, which the market is less likely to provide. That means single dramas, creative risk-taking, and challenging work from strong authorial writers and directors. It means women's and disabled sport as well as the traditional male sports.

The growth of channels offering partisan opinion under the badge of 'news' mean that the BBC's commitment to universal access to quality, fact-based news and evidence-based content is more important than ever. Elites have always had access to good information but as more people rely on the echo chamber of social media to tell them what they want to hear, it is essential that everyone has access to *free* trustworthy, accurate and impartial information.

Recommendations

- The BBC must strengthen its commitment to providing genuinely local news via broadcast channels, including local TV and radio as well as online. Local reporting reinforces communities, provides accountability and is the best place to counter inaccurate and malign information
- The BBC must maintain news in prominent positions in its broadcast TV and radio schedules, strengthen support for domestic and international current affairs reportage (not just documentaries) and find ways to better integrate the knowledge and networks of the World Service into its reporting to UK audiences
- The BBC should aspire to make its News app the equivalent of the iPlayer, in terms of profile and usage
- The BBC needs to ensure that it has production and decision-making centres in all parts of the UK, and that its producers and commissioners are drawn from the widest possible range of backgrounds and are truly representative of the UK audiences they serve

A BBC funded fairly and at scale

Overview

For the BBC to survive as a credible cultural force, it must operate at scale so that it is large enough to be relevant to people's lives and not reduced to a marginalised presence, like PBS in America or ABC in Australia. Crucially, it must operate across all platforms. It must be secure enough to innovate.

To fulfil its remit of universality it must have the resources to invest in UK talent and UK content across all genres - including drama, comedy, entertainment and popular music - as a means of promoting British talent and British values across the board and around the world. *Casualty*, *Strictly*, Radio 1 and *Match of the Day* are as integral to the BBC's place in the nation as Radio 3, experimental drama, and BBC 4 documentaries.

Figures demonstrate the vital importance of that investment to the creative economy: every pound of BBC investment generates more than £2.50 for the UK economy, supporting more than 50,000 jobs and 300 production companies. It has driven creative hubs in Salford and Cardiff, with the majority of economic value generated outside London. As the late Tessa Jowell once said, the BBC licence fee is Britain's venture capital for the creative industries. That capital includes creative and technical training across the UK which will be vital to equip us for the 'fourth industrial revolution'.

All programmes should remain free at the point of use and arguments that a universal BBC should be restricted to narrowly-defined 'public service content' with an option to pay extra for premium entertainment or sport must be resisted. The cultural, social and political implications of a two-tier national broadcasting system for 'them and us' are dangerous and divisive.

The BBC is the cornerstone of our public service broadcasting ecosystem and the benchmark for other UK broadcasters, so self-serving arguments from its commercial competitors about 'crowding out' must be resisted - just as we resist the lobbying of private medical companies to scale back the NHS. Ofcom therefore needs to adapt its regulatory culture to take into account the civic role of the BBC, and to underscore its statutory duty to promote the interests of citizens as well as consumers.

The starting point for deciding the level of funding for the BBC should be a genuine debate about what kind of BBC we, as a nation, want. It should then be given the proper resources to fulfil its purpose and remit. This means a sustained and guaranteed income which keeps pace with inflation. There should be no short-term fixes and no repeat of the 30 per cent cuts that have been inflicted since 2010 with no public debate.

Recommendations

- The nature of BBC funding and its level should be the subject of an independent assessment rooted in the following three principles
 - It should enable universal access to all BBC content
 - It should remedy the severity of previous cuts
 - It should contain a progressive element which takes into account levels of income inequality
- A wholly independent funding mechanism should be established to protect the BBC from further erosion, and from interference by future governments
- Any new funding mechanism should be flexible enough to allow the BBC to pursue and maximise commercial revenue without compromising its Charter remit; and to allow for philanthropy and voluntary donations beyond any mandated payment

A global BBC

Overview

There is a global market for screen content and formats: this is an industry where the UK excels, and the BBC is at the centre of this. It is a hub for creativity, training and innovation, contributing to Britain's soft power abroad and to economic prosperity at home.

The biggest challenges we face - including climate change, the biggest challenge of all - require international collaboration and understanding, and the BBC is the only UK news organisation with the capacity to develop a knowledge base and explain the issues at scale.

The BBC World Service has unique soft power and the biggest international audience by far of any of its competitors. Its editorial independence is widely acknowledged, and its global reach and esteem are based on a recognition that it always strives to tell the truth. It is a measure of its success that it is excluded by non-democratic countries who fear the power of publicly available and accurate information - such as Russia, China and Iran.

Information has no borders and global threats can have local consequences - what happens in foreign countries like India and Pakistan feeds into expatriate communities in the UK. Non-democratic countries which are our economic competitors (China) and our ideological opponents (Russia) are very active in an information war that seeks to undermine evidence and destabilise trust.

A profound understanding of international developments built up by the World Service and BBC Monitoring informs the whole range of the BBC's domestic and international output. It is more important today than ever before.

Recommendations

- There must be whole-hearted government support for the BBC's editorial independence, domestically and internationally. This must include well-directed investment to support both bbc.com and the World Service
- The BBC should be tasked with an enhanced remit to counter misinformation and given the appropriate financial resources to protect our democracy from bad actors
- To achieve this, the BBC should be encouraged to take a global lead in international collaboration between trustworthy information providers on a wide range of subjects from climate science to medicine, and from statistics to history
- The government needs to recognise that our public interest is global, not just national, and develop joined-up policy across the inter-related areas of information, digital security and citizenship
- The British government should sanction (and, if necessary, prosecute) those UK-based commercial companies that distort and pervert the information space for profit
- The UK should develop a new vision for the architecture of information by acting in collaboration with other democracies. The USA is looking to Europe for standards in internet regulation, and Europe looks to the UK for standards in public service broadcasting. The BBC is in a pivotal position to play a key role as EU media policy now recognises that institutions are crucial and is developing its policies accordingly

Values-led technology

Overview

The government has set a target to increase total R&D investment to 2.4 per cent of GDP by 2027, recognising the crucial role of research and innovation in driving growth. The BBC must play a leading role in achieving this.

From its inception, the BBC has not just been an adopter of new technology, but an innovator, creating and standardising the broadcast tools and systems on which every other broadcaster would be built. The BBC's R&D, which was funded by the licence fee, ensured that the broadcasting ecosystem was built in the public, not commercial, interest. It makes every person in the UK a part-owner in the communal network - and at every available opportunity, an active member - rather than only a passive consumer.

Whether they pay the licence fee themselves or not, and whether they actually consume the BBC's output now, in the future, or never, the BBC ensures that the entire broadcast network is accountable and answerable to every citizen.

The internet changed all of this. It is a ubiquitous medium and a communications network that the BBC does not control, and to which it cannot guarantee access for citizens. It is not so much 'for' us as 'using' us. The motivations of platform providers are opaque; they are not attempting to provide public value to the UK and its citizens or to use their data in the public interest. They are not holding power to account or resisting the overpowering influence of foreign and commercial interests. They are not setting high standards for quality, performance, behaviour and purpose. The means by which the BBC reaches its audiences are in urgent need of reinvention to ensure that it is always accessible by, and accountable to, the UK public.

The BBC is not just content. Any discussion of its future remit must acknowledge the core function that R&D plays in delivering the BBC's public purposes, embracing and developing new technologies to reach audiences today and tomorrow. Its innovations must be explicitly owned by the public, open source and free for others to build upon - and at the heart of these innovations must be respect for individuals' data and privacy.

This cannot just be limited to incremental improvements to the status quo. The BBC needs to directly address the issues of our digital networks which no longer prioritise the needs of the UK public. More than a decade ago, Mark Thompson advocated for the development of a digital public space, as a vital evolution of the physical public spaces that are so fundamental for a society.¹

¹ "The case for a major public intervention in broadcasting and the web is probably stronger today than at any point in our history. And the opportunity for the BBC and for others not just to defend the concept of public space, but to transform it and to use the new technologies and new media to populate it with amazing new ideas - the opportunity to forge a new relationship with the public within that space." [*The BBC and Public Space, Mark Thompson, 18th November 2009*, https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20091118_1.htm]

Recommendations

- The BBC should move towards developing an independent and universal Public Service Network for the benefit of all UK citizens
- This would be free at the point of use, in the spirit of the political and commercial independence on which the BBC was founded
- This would be accessible to every UK citizen using internet-connected devices, in their homes or on the move
- It should connect all UK citizens to a 'slice' of internet bandwidth set aside for independent and impartial public service and to carry all PSB output - including advertising on the non-BBC services
- It should set, and always meet, standards for reliability, privacy, accessibility, accountability and universality. It would ensure that there is a place on the internet where everyone can feel and be safe and free from spyware, viruses, porn or other malicious disturbance. It would be a place where children can play and learn and meet their friends, and where adults can convene and debate and challenge each other without the need to hide from aggressive reaction
- It should be a place where news can be trusted and information quoted with confidence. It should hold power to account. It should not be subject to the pressures of the market, advertisers or 'foreign' interests. It would become the flagship of British media once again

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Appendix: Who We Are

The British Broadcasting Challenge is a small group of media academics, writers and producers who are aware of the challenges facing public service broadcasting.

We have two aims:

1	To promote a wide-ranging discussion about the future of UK public service broadcasting - its potential for good, its ability to transmit truth, its institutional place at the heart of the UK and how it can be improved for the digital age.
2	To ensure that this debate is accountable to parliament and the public, that it is open and transparent, and not conducted behind closed doors.

The British Broadcasting Challenge launched in May 2021 with an open letter to the Secretary of State for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport asking for an open, genuine and transparent debate on the future of public service broadcasting.

This was signed by a wide range of more than 120 public figures including Sir David Attenborough, Dame Hilary Mantel, Sir Lenny Henry, Sir Richard Lambert, Sir Mark Wolpert, Sir David Manning, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Baroness Kidron. It was reported in the *Financial Times* on 24 May 2021 and the full letter can be read on our website.

Steering Group members:

Pat Younge (chair)
 Professor Steven Barnett
 Christopher Day
 Rosaleen Hughes
 Lindsay Mackie

John Newbiggin OBE
 Jess Search (1969-2023)
 Professor Jean Seaton
 Chris Waiting