

DRAFT PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE



Over the last three decades the BBC's independence has been steadily eroded and its programme making increasingly commercialised. In recent years in particular, its funding has been severely cut and its editorial culture has become increasingly conservative. If the BBC is to live up to its core values and meet the challenges of 21st century media and politics, radical reform is necessary. We want an adequately funded BBC that positively shapes a broader media ecology, nationally and internationally. This will mean a clear break with the market-based approach that has eroded the BBC's public service ethos. However, rather than returning to the statist model on which it was founded, the BBC should become a modern, democratised public platform and network, completely independent of government and the market.

The Media Reform Coalition has produced these draft recommendations in order to stimulate further public debate about the measures that are necessary to secure a revamped and independent BBC. We invite you to join the conversation. Email info@mediareform.org.uk or visit www.mediareform.org.uk.

POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE

Governmental influence over the BBC threatens to undermine its capacity to deliver impartial news and information. Whilst the BBC's current Royal Charter states that it should be 'independent in all matters', it also stipulates that governments are responsible both for appointing the chair and four directors to the BBC Board, and for setting the level of the licence fee. The periodic renewal of the Royal Charter is another means of governmental influence over the BBC.

These procedures should be abolished so the BBC becomes truly independent of governments. In place of these mechanisms of accountability, members of the BBC Board should be directly elected by licence fee payers and BBC staff. The BBC should be put on a permanent statutory footing and an independent, non-market, regulator, acting solely in the public interest, should set the level of the licence fee and periodically review the BBC's constitutional remit.

DEMOCRATISATION

The BBC Board currently consists of the chair and four National Directors for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, who are appointed by government; six other non-executive directors, who are appointed by the other board members; and four executive directors, the Director General and other senior BBC executives.

This corporate structure should be democratised so the BBC is more directly accountable to licence fee payers. Rather than consisting of government and board appointed 'establishment' figures, the BBC should be managed by a board consisting of executive directors elected by staff and non-executive directors elected by licence fee payers. The BBC board members should then be responsible for nominating one member as chair and appointing the BBC Director General through an open and fully transparent process. National and regional boards should also be established, similarly elected by BBC staff and local licence fee payers. At least half of these board members should be women, and minority groups should also be guaranteed adequate representation.

FUNDING

The BBC's major source of income, the licence fee, was frozen from 2010 to 2017 and the BBC has had to bear the cost of free TV licences for the over-75s. This has meant a dramatic reduction in the BBC's income over the course

of a decade. To ensure the BBC can deliver creative, diverse, high-quality programmes, and accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming, it must receive adequate and secure public funding that is independent of governmental control.

REGULATION

Broadcasting in the UK was originally regulated according to public service principles, but this model has been increasingly marginalised, with the BBC more and more subject to a market-based regulation. The BBC's activities currently have to be balanced with consideration for competition through public value tests, and are now also subjected to market impact assessments by Ofcom, an independent communications regulator that privileges consumer interests over those of citizens.

Regulation of the BBC must move away from a 'market failure' model in which the BBC is expected to provide what the market will not, to a model in which public and democratic programme making, and rigorous professional standards, positively shape the broader media ecology. A new public media regulator should be established that will act purely in the public interest. It should be responsible, among other things, for the regulation of the BBC and the other public service broadcasters, as well as the new media mutuals and cooperatives, and for regulating standards in commercial broadcasting. It should set the level of the licence fee and periodically review the BBC's constitutional remit.

DECENTRALISATION AND REGIONALISATION

Despite some progress with strengthening regional production, the BBC remains a highly centralised organisation. The London-based, centralised managerial and editorial structure needs

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The licence fee system should be maintained but radically reformed, with the rate set by an independent, non-market, regulator. Television licences should be replaced with a digital licence fee based on internet access rather than possession of television receiving equipment. The new digital licence fee should be payable by all households via their Internet service provider (ISP). To avoid payment falling disproportionately on lower income groups, the fee should be pegged to households' council tax bands.

BBC Worldwide should continue to generate commercial returns from international markets, but with a preference for partnership with public media and the development of international public media platforms.

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to be reformed to ensure the BBC fully reflects the diversity of the UK's nations, regions and communities.

To make the BBC more accountable to the public it serves, programme making and editorial functions should be devolved to the nations and regions. A system of localised, democratic management and commissioning should be established, with national and regional boards elected by staff and local licence fee payers in the same manner as the BBC Board. The role of the BBC Board and Executive Committee should be restricted to corporate-wide oversight, coordination and strategic planning. This strengthened local management and programme making will help to address the recognised need for more local reporting.

A DIGITAL PUBLIC PLATFORM AND NETWORK

The BBC's myBBC initiative has sought to personalise its digital products and services, with the introduction of sign-in technology allowing for the collection of audience metrics. Whilst this technology has so far been used mainly to deliver user specific programme recommendations, there is great potential for the development of the BBC as a democratic public platform and network, free from governmental or commercial control.

The BBC should develop the capacity for user-to-user interactions, providing a shared space free from the commercial imperatives to fuel controversy where plural world-views can be articulated and brought into dialogue. As a democratic and public platform, the BBC must offer something very different to commercial providers. Data collected via its sign-in services should not be geared solely towards consumer-based personal preferences. Algorithms should by default reflect the BBC's public purposes, with licence fee payers able to adjust them according to their own personal preferences, rather than just their viewing and listening habits. They should be able to understand and control the algorithms used, and have the option to opt out from all but the most minimal of user monitoring. Data collected and stored should also be accessible not only to the BBC, but should be publicly available in a clear and accessible format, but with restrictions on any commercial exploitation.

As part of this innovation in digital public media, all BBC content should be made available to licence fee payers in perpetuity. This will mean appropriate intellectual property agreements becoming a condition for all BBC commissioned programming, as well as in-house production.

Internationally, the BBC's radio programmes and podcasts should be made freely available on BBC digital platforms, as should the majority of television news and current affairs programming. Other television programming should continue to be distributed internationally via the market, with revenue returning to the BBC via BBC Worldwide. Wherever possible, however, the BBC's programming should be distributed either via its own digital platforms or in partnership with other public media organisations. The BBC should also provide technical assistance to public media organisations elsewhere to help them develop their own public platforms and networks.

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The BBC has acknowledged the need to address the question of diversity in both its programming and its workforce. The Diversity & Inclusion Strategy is a welcome step, as is the commitment to Project Diamond, an industry-wide initiative to monitor diversity across the sector.

Ensuring adequate diversity will require complete transparency about the makeup of the BBC's workforce. This will mean publishing rigorously collected equality monitoring data at the programme and production level for all producers of BBC content, whether in-house or external. This should include data on social class, as well as age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, disabilities, and other characteristics.

Delivering on diversity will also mean addressing the casualisation of the BBC's workforce over the last three decades. Precarious working conditions narrow the range of people able to produce programmes, disproportionately impacting on those from lower income families, women, minority groups, and those with disabilities. The BBC must not only ensure the needs of such groups are adequately met, but must also re-establish itself as a provider of expertise for industry professionals, identifying and targeting under-represented and marginalised groups in its training.

COMMISSIONING AND PROGRAMME MAKING

The independent production quota mandates that at least 25% of BBC TV programming must come from private media companies (minus some exempt areas), whilst under the recent Royal Charter, all BBC programming, with the exception of news and news-related current affairs, is now being opened up to commercial

competition. The Charter also created a new commercial subsidiary, BBC Studios, incorporating the majority of BBC TV programme making, that competes with private companies for BBC commissions and is able to provide content to other media platforms. This commercialisation weakens the BBC's production capacity, undermines universal access to BBC produced programmes and increases precarity in the broader industry.

This marketisation should be reversed. In-house production guarantees should be restored to ensure the BBC remains a public source of independent programme making and a provider of training and expertise. BBC Studios, therefore, should be brought back 'in-house'.

Strict stipulations should be introduced into commissioning to ensure adequate diversity within workforces, more equal pay, and better working conditions. External commissioning, moreover, should be rebalanced, with the revenue currently going to large multinationals cut back in favour of smaller, independent producers. An increasing proportion of funding should be earmarked not only for smaller producers, but also specifically to support the development of alternative models of ownership in the media industry, with quotas introduced for commissioning to media mutuals and cooperatives.

An increasing proportion of the BBC's regional programme commissioning, meanwhile, should also be allocated to audience-led commissioning. The BBC has already developed national audience panels, and has piloted 'diverse audience panels' to improve programming through public engagement and collaboration. These initiatives should be built upon so as to allow licence fee payers direct influence over local commissioning. A proportion of regional commissioning decisions should be organised via a combination of diverse audience panels, selected by lot and paid modestly for their time, and via regional voting facilitated by the BBC's digital platforms. All audience-commissioning processes and audience-commissioned programmes should be sufficiently publicised on the BBC's digital platforms. Programmes would also have to satisfy the BBC's policies on diversity and inclusion, and would be subject to quotas stipulating a minimum proportion of news and current affairs programming.

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