Manifesto for a People's Media: Creating a Media Commons

BBC and BEYOND

MRC

Manifesto for a People's Media

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MEDIA REFORM COALITION

BBC and Beyond. Imagining a media commons

Summary and demands

The 2020s are set to be a decade of huge challenges - whether that's the climate crisis, public health emergencies, or the possible break up of the UK. All too often, the UK's media fail to confront the problems we face. In a context where rapid social and economic changes are inevitable, we urgently need a media that can help us interrogate these problems, find solutions and support the transformations we need.

This manifesto outlines a vision for a media that can meet these challenges, where the public interest, community empowerment and collective care are at its heart: a system we are calling a media commons.

IMAGINING THE MEDIA COMMONS

A commons is a collective resource sustained through the active participation of those who rely on it. Organisations within the media commons would be managed collectively to ensure that they are **independent, accountable, democratic** and **for everyone.** They would be funded by significant new public investment, recognising that the commercial model of media leads to unaccountable monopolies and exacerbates inequalities[1], and can't provide the journalistic and cultural content that we need.

The media commons wouldn't replace commercial media. But it would become the heart of a media system that is fit for the future - just as the NHS is the public heart of healthcare.

The media commons in the UK would contain:

+ **A People's BBC and Channel 4, which have been radically transformed to become far more devolved and participatory. Rather than just interacting with them as passive audiences, most people would help make decisions about how they are run – whether that's electing decision-makers to represent them, being part of participatory commissioning or sitting on a panel to oversee coverage of controversial issues. Because of this, they would be widely trusted and embedded in people's lives. A British Digital Cooperative would be established to develop the national-scale digital infrastructure to support this.**

+ **An Independent Media Commons – a thriving ecology of participatory newsrooms, community radio stations, digital innovators and cultural producers, supported by democratically-controlled public resources to tell the stories of all the UK's communities. New funding of around £1 billion a year would be distributed through a network of national and regional Media Councils using participatory methods (drawing on learning from participatory budgeting and grantmaking) to support news journalism, cultural content and digital innovation.**

This is a bold vision, but the seeds of the media commons already exist within the UK media landscape today.

BUILDING THE MEDIA COMMONS

Our proposals here focus on how to strengthen the parts of our media that already work as a commons, and help our public service media transition towards the media commons model. But these proposals will not work in isolation. We also need strong measures to reduce the power of private media – breaking up monopolies, enforcing regulations on data and privacy, and bringing the largest companies into public ownership[2].

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[1] The Media Manifesto (2020)
[2] The Media Manifesto (2020)

The Independent Media Commons

The best examples of 'media commoning' today can be found within independent and community media organisations. These need to be recognised as having the potential to play as important a role in social and cultural life as our public broadcasters, and be properly supported and expanded to reach all communities as a wide-reaching Independent Media Commons. Immediate steps towards creating it would include:

Provide support for community buyouts of local commercial newspapers which are under threat of closure.

Establish National and Regional Independent Media Councils to distribute new and substantial funds to independent, non-profit media organisations operating in the public interest, using participatory methods of decision-making.

Create a new legal structure for public interest news organisations that has some of the tax benefits of charities, on condition that they are regulated by IMPRESS.

Support the creation of new partnerships between local authorities, universities and independent content producers to facilitate a network of media hubs around the UK, which can work with local communities, train content producers and share locally produced news and cultural content (see the Cardiff university case study).

Restore the Community Radio Fund to an equivalent level per station as when it was launched in 2005[3] - around £10 million for today's 300 stations.

Open up the Audio Content Fund to Community Radio stations, rather than limiting applications to independent producers.

Maintain protections for Community Radio as they migrate to local DAB platforms to avoid commercial takeover – in particular, maintaining regulations around only being able to run individual stations.

When local authorities, combined authorities, and metro mayors are procuring goods and services, the use of data for local public good should be included in agreements[4]

Create a network of Data Trusts[5] to steward and govern the sharing of data for the public benefit

[3]In 2005, £500,000 was split between 14 stations.
[4]James Meadway (2020) Creating a Digital Commons
[5]Jack Hardinges (2018) What is a Data Trust?

A People's BBC and Channel 4

As part of the Media Commons our public service broadcasters should be guaranteed to be:

Independent:
Able to hold powerful interests to account

+ The BBC's public funding levels should be determined by a fully independent body that is protected from government pressure, and can respond swiftly to market pressures and technological change (such as rapid growth of streaming services).

+ The BBC's Royal Charter should be replaced with a proper legal structure for public service media, so that its remit and constitution can be properly scrutinised by Parliament rather than unilaterally changed by government. After this, future changes should be made through regular reviews which are voted on by license fee payers.

+ Senior appointments at the BBC and Channel 4 should be removed from government control.

+ Within the new legal framework for public service broadcasting, Channel 4 should be protected from government interference and threats of privatisation.

+ Channel 4 should become an advertising-free platform, funded by a UK cross-platform digital advertising levy, which is safeguarded from government interference. This will allow it to focus on creating great programmes for the public rather than providing audiences for advertisers.

+ Journalists within public broadcasting should be protected by a conscience clause, allowing them to refuse unethical assignments. The BBC and Channel 4 should be transparent about how they monitor their workers' social media profiles.

Accountable
Facing consequences when they do harm:

+ A new independent regulator, dedicated to the media commons, should be established. This should act purely in the public interest and be responsible for the regulation of the BBC, other public service media, and public service content in commercial broadcasting. This regulator should take over these responsibilities from Ofcom, allowing Ofcom to focus on its other duties. The new regulator should develop a shared architecture with other regulators such as IMPRESS (which would continue to focus on the independent journalism sector) e.g. ensuring complaints are dealt with swiftly.

+ The new regulator should also be responsible for online regulation, including harmful content, the impact of algorithms and harmful design.

+ All appointments to the new regulator should be independent of government, and senior appointments should be accountable to audiences e.g. through being elected.

+ The new regulator should be adequately funded to fulfil its remit, deal promptly with complaints, conduct research and launch detailed investigations so as to minimise harm. The complaints process should be simple and effective so that it is transparent and accessible to everyone.

+ The regulator should draw on the Citizen Media Assemblies (see below) to ensure public participation in defining what is harmful, what is meaningful redress, and keeping people informed about their rights, especially in the rapidly changing online environment.

+ The regulator should include a racism reporting service to map and address racism within public media[6], promote the use of appropriate language by journalists e.g. to describe disabled people[7], and monitor and address workplace harassment and bullying.

+ All media content should be subject to a 'right to reply' so valid complaints are able to broadcast or publish counter responses from affected people and communities, with equal prominence to the content complained about.

[6] Marcus Ryder (2020) Race to be Heard
[7] NUJ Disability Handbook

Democratic:
Participatory and representative of diverse lives:

+ **Programme making and editorial functions - including how money is distributed - should be fully devolved to the nations and regions, so that programmes fully represent the needs and desires of the whole country.**

+ **National and regional boards of the BBC and Channel 4 should have worker representation, and also involve the wider public e.g. through allowing licence fee payers to elect members.**

+ **A devolved network of Citizen Media Assemblies should be established to manage commissioning, so more people can have a say on the programmes that get made. These could be structured using the 15 existing BBC nations and regions divisions[8]. Citizen Media Assembly boards should be elected by staff and local licence fee payers, and quotas and affirmative action should be used to ensure broad-based representation.**

+ **News coverage should be regularly reviewed to assess whether it meaningfully represents diverse views and communities, and whether it over-represents official and elite sources. For complex or controversial issues, panels drawn from Citizen Media Assemblies should be established to oversee reporting[9].**

+ **New forms of participatory commissioning should be developed by Citizen Media Assemblies. These commissioning processes should draw on the history of the BBC Community Programme Unit and Channel 4 workshops, as well as forms of collective resource distribution such as participatory budgeting and grantmaking.**

+ **Both the BBC and Channel 4 should ensure that their workers are representative of wider society, including trainees and those working for external content producers. Rigorous equality monitoring data should be collected to support this, including data on job roles and pay grades. Reasonable adjustments for disabled people should be publicised during recruitment, and incorporated into internal training to ensure managers understand them.**

[8] Map of BBC TV regions.
[9] As briefly attempted with Brexit.

- **+ The BBC and Channel 4 should have formal obligations to address casualisation and precarious working conditions, so it's easier for people who aren't wealthy to work for them. BECTU and the NUJ should be involved in developing contracts, which should also take account of the impact of worker rights within the institutions on the wider media sector. Freelancers should also be protected e.g. through implementation of the Freelancers Charter[10].**

- **+ A British Digital Cooperative should be established to develop a surveillance-free public platform architecture to include social media, search and other information-sorting and communication utilities to enable citizens to interact with one another and develop resources for social and political communication[11].**

For everyone:
Serving everybody's needs and accessible to all:

- **+ The television licence fee should be replaced with a progressive license pegged to household council tax bands, so that wealthier people contribute more.**

- **+ Affordable full fibre broadband should be guaranteed to all homes.**

- **+ England should adopt the same obligations to provide British Sign Language interpretation for news as exists in Wales and Scotland.**

- **+ The BBC should be used as a mechanism for raising accessibility standards online, by creating digital tools for readability etc and making them publicly available on Creative Commons licences.**

- **+ The whole of the BBC archive should be made permanently publicly accessible worldwide on Creative Commons licences.**

- **+ Algorithms on the iPlayer and 4oD should be redesigned to encourage people to encounter a variety of content, similar to the broadcasting schedule, rather than emphasising similarity. These algorithms should be made public to ensure transparency.**

- **+ Channel 4's remit should be strengthened and refocused on serving minority audiences, and supporting innovative programming and film production.**

[10] The Coalition for Change Freelancers' Charter
[11] Dan Hind (2019) The British Digital Cooperative

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Introduction

It is clear that the UK and the wider world are facing multiple, interconnected crises.

- Huge and growing inequality
- The health and economic fallout of the pandemic
- Growing democratic deficits and possible breakup of the UK
- Catastrophic climate change and ecological collapse

These problems are not going away. The 2020s are a pivotal decade for tackling them.

Woven through all of these crises is a loss of trust in institutions, including the institutions which are meant to inform and educate us about the world – our media.

- Trust in media in the UK is at a record low - 70% believe the media is failing to be objective and non-partisan[12]
- The media landscape is dominated by huge, unaccountable corporations. Digital platforms are the biggest monopolies the world has ever seen, while 90% of the UK's daily national newspaper market is owned by just three companies[13]
- Despite an abundance of content, news deserts are growing and many communities are unrepresented[14]

Underlying many of these problems is the fact that the economic model of funding private media through advertising is failing. Research from across the globe shows the commercial model is increasingly unable to produce news and cultural content in the public interest, and there is an urgent need for large-scale investment from governments to prevent "an extinction event"[15].

Dealing with the huge challenges that we face means having a media system oriented towards the public interest, rather than the interests of politicians, wealthy owners or powerful businesses. And it means having a system which is able to harness the huge potential of digital technologies and data for the public good, rather than seeing them captured for private benefit. Our public service media – institutions like the BBC and Channel 4 – have a crucial role to play, and need to be strengthened and transformed for the digital age. But this transformation can't be confined to those institutions. It needs a far more wide-ranging transition: the revitalisation of existing public media, as part of the creation of a *media commons*.

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[12] Edelman Trust Barometer UK Findings (2021)
[13] Who Owns the UK Media? (2021) Media Reform Coalition
[14] In 2017, 57.9% of the UK population lived in areas without a daily local newspaper; since then, many other local titles have closed.
[15] Forum on Information and Democracy (2021) A New Deal for Journalism

BECOMING MEDIA COMMONERS

Commons are a shared resource, which is governed collectively by a community according to their rules and norms - practices known as 'commoning'.[16] They are democratic and participatory, and geared towards long-term sustainability. Building on ideas about the digital and data commons,[17] a media commons would be made up of **not-for-profit media initiatives that act in the public interest,** which have community empowerment and collective care at their heart.[18]

In a media commons, our media would be supported with significant public resources, and managed collectively to ensure that they are:

independent – able to hold powerful interests to account
accountable – facing consequences when they do harm
democratic – participatory and representative of diverse lives
for everyone – serving everybody's needs and accessible to all

Within the UK media landscape today, we can see many seeds of the media commons – in the best of public broadcasting, and within media cooperatives, democratically-run community media and open source digital innovation. The media commons of the future will include legacy public service media institutions which have opened themselves up to being collectively managed by the public. And it will also contain a powerful, horizontally connected and well-resourced Independent Media Commons, which can sit alongside these institutions, collaborate with them and hold them to account.

The media commons won't replace all commercial media, but it will be the heart of our media system - just as the NHS is the public heart of healthcare.

ABOUT THIS MANIFESTO

This manifesto comes out of the Media Reform Coalition's campaign The BBC and Beyond: Reimagining Public Media. In 2021, we held a series of public events around the UK and spoke to dozens of organisations and individuals - including those working at the BBC and Channel 4 - about their vision of how public media in the UK could be made fit for the future. Around 30,000 people took part in these events.

We heard many important, concrete proposals for how our current media system could be improved. But we also heard of the need to think bigger – to recognise that the kind of society that can rise to meet the crises ahead looks very different to today, and that the fight for different media is intrinsically connected to the many other issues we face. This manifesto therefore begins with the **bigger picture** – a long-term vision of the kind of society we need to build and the role that media could play within it.

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[16] P2P Foundation (2017) Commons Transition and P2P
[17] Mathew Lawrence and Laurie Landbourn-Layton (2018) The Digital Commonwealth
[18] See Birkinbine and Kidd (2020) Rethinking the Communication Commons

After this, it tries to **imagine** what a media commons could look like in the medium-term, in a society not so different from our own. This will contain an Independent Media Commons – a thriving ecology of participatory newsrooms, community radio stations, digital innovators and cultural producers - alongside a transformed BBC and Channel 4.[19] For each of these, it contains concrete proposals for **building** the media commons – steps we can take right now towards creating a people's media.

While this may seem ambitious, the seeds of a new kind of media are all around us. Case studies show that many of the ideas are already being tried, or have existed in the past.

COMMUNITY RADIO

From the early 2000s, Ofcom has granted licences to hyper-local community radio stations. The sector has grown hugely, and there are now over 300 stations – more than commercial radio and the BBC put together. At least 25,000 volunteers are estimated to be currently involved in community radio broadcasting in the UK, far more than are employed in mainstream radio.

Many of the approaches of community radio, such as having hyper-local content branding, and presenters from the area whose accents are relatable, have helped create uniquely strong relationships between stations and their audiences. Community radio stations are often inviting community spaces, with a much more relaxed and inclusive feel than more 'professional' media environments.

During the pandemic, many of these stations became important anchors for their members and audiences to combat isolation and convey specialist news and information. In East Leeds, Chapel FM was specially licensed to communicate with people who had no internet. In Newcastle, Spice FM played a crucial role in communicating the support available for individuals and businesses to South Asian audiences, who were not getting information they needed from the council or the BBC. Research has suggested that the "community sector seems to be gaining ground in becoming the nation's trusted local radio provider".[20]

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[19] While ITV and Channel 5 are also public service broadcasters, we have chosen to focus on the BBC and Channel 4 as these are publicly owned and deliver far more public service content.
[20] Jo Coleman (2020) UK Community Radio Production Responses to Covid 19

The Bigger Picture

The many crises we face are all made worse by the failings in our media. We urgently need a media system that is collectively owned and democratically run so we can tackle these issues. However, most of these problems didn't start with the media, and can't be solved just by changing how our media works. Across our many conversations, we were cautioned against taking a narrow view of media reform, and to connect the fight for a media commons to broader struggles to devolve power and give communities more control over their lives.

This section outlines some elements of a long-term vision – the kind of society we need to build, and the role media would play in that world. While this vision may challenge received ideas of what is 'realistic', major social and economic change is inevitable given the crises we face - the IPCC has stated that limiting global warming to 1.5°C will require far-reaching and unprecedented transitions in energy, land use and industry.[21] We face a stark choice between fighting for this kind of sustainable future or facing further ecological and social collapse.

What kind of society do we want...

...and what would media be for?

...A participatory society.

Society is far more devolved, bottom-up and participatory. People expect to be involved in democratic and economic decisions, which are made as locally as possible, through public institutions and cooperative companies/organisations. Everyone is supported by a Social Guarantee[22] - a living income and universal services. Nobody is dependent on precarious work, and working less than five days a week is the norm, giving people time to participate in community and democratic activities. A slower pace of life allows everyone to be part of decision-making, and accessibility and care are central to how systems are designed.

Participating in media is a natural part of participating in other parts of collective life. Getting involved in creating media is normal and possible for everyone, with adequate training provided, so media producers are much more representative of wider society. National and regional regulators might still be part of holding media institutions accountable, but far deeper accountability is achieved through being involved in democratic decision-making of media organisations. Media is no longer focused around a rush to catch up with immediate, breaking news. Instead, it is a much slower process of storytelling and collective information seeking to deeply understand problems and explore solutions.
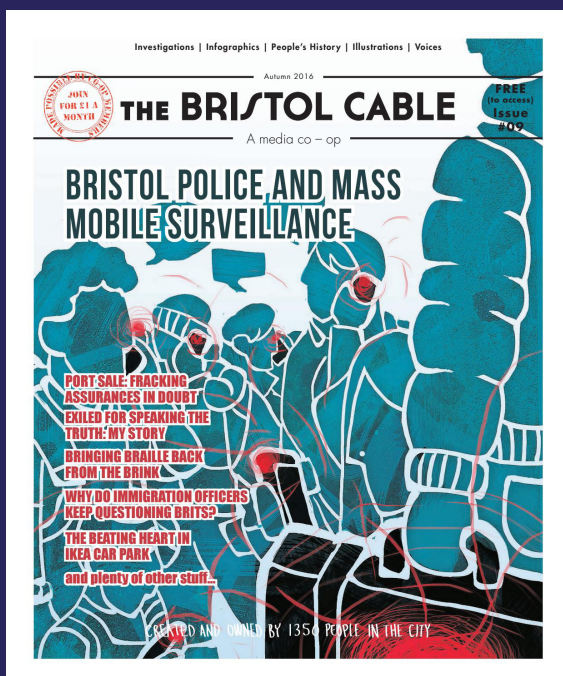
THE BRISTOL CABLE

The Bristol Cable is a grassroots, community-led media cooperative founded in 2014. They produce a free quarterly magazine with a circulation of approximately 30,000 copies, and investigative and community-led journalism online. They prioritise holding power to account through investigations, raising up marginalised voices, and community engagement.

The Cable is owned by over 2,600 members who each pay a small monthly fee and are equal legal owners. Members select member-Directors who provide guidance and accountability to the staff team.

Members are also involved in decisions which help guide the direction of the organisation, such as what kind of journalism the Cable should prioritise, and whether they should take funding from certain sources.

The Cable believes that having members isn't just a good way to fund journalism but improves what gets produced. Through regular call outs, the Cable engages with members and wider communities to inform articles, aiming to draw on the opinions, experiences, and expertise of the people and communities affected by stories.

The impact of this different kind of reporting was clear during the Kill the Bill protests in Bristol in early 2021. Reporters from the Cable were present on the ground and able to give more accurate coverage. For example, unlike other media they didn't reproduce police press releases which misrepresented the number of police injuries.

The Cable is:

+ Independent: not-for-profit and funded by a mix of member contributions (35%), grants (60%) and advertising
+ Accountable: though members revenue and the member Director board, the organisation is directly accountable to its members
+ Democratic: voting on the annual budget, board of directors and overall focus at the yearly AGM; a board of reader members; a collectively-decided ethical advertising charter
+ For everyone: all the content is freely available and they're working hard to make their journalists more representative of the communities they serve

...A society that can embrace constitutional change in the UK.

Because the need for more participatory, devolved democracy has been recognised in this vision, constitutional changes to the shape of the UK have not been unnecessarily disruptive and divisive. Less power being held centrally by Westminster is welcomed as enhancing inclusion and participation.

Public media has been a trusted host for conversations about Scottish and Welsh independence, and Irish unification, meaning that decisions to leave or stay within the UK have been recognised by all sides as democratic.
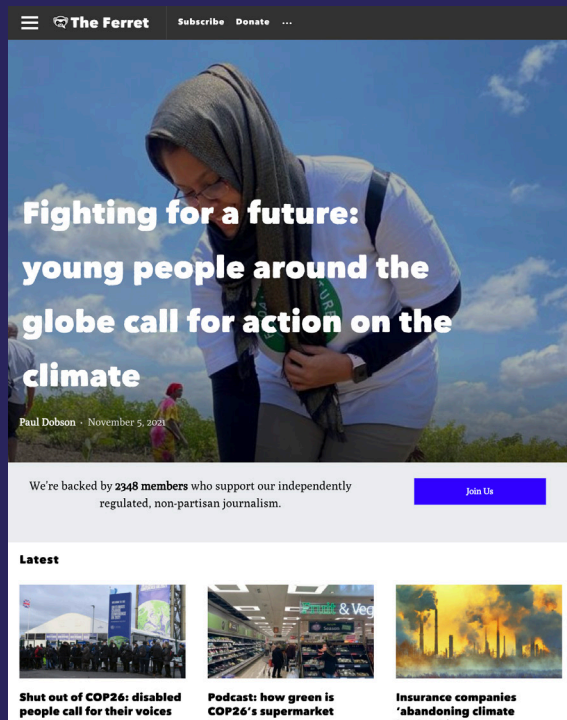
THE FERRET

The Ferret is an online investigative platform in Scotland. It was founded in 2015, to try and address the lack of civic infrastructure in Scotland, and make sure that Holyrood is developing good policy and being held to account. Like the Bristol Cable, it is a cooperative owned by its members.

There are journalist members and reader members, who elect different directors who have different responsibilities – the journalist directors have editorial control, and reader directors deal with complaints.

The Ferret is nonpartisan, including on the question of Scottish independence. In the 2014 referendum, media in Scotland became increasingly polarised on unionist/independence lines, and many saw the BBC as biased in favour of Scotland staying in the union. The Ferret hopes that by acting in a democratic and accountable way they will be trusted by people across the debate, and able to provide a broad, shared knowledge base whatever decisions Scotland makes about its future.

The Ferret is:

+ Independent: not-for-profit and funded by a mix of member subscriptions, grants and advertising; nonpartisan, including on the question of Scottish independence
+ Accountable: regulated by IMPRESS; reader directors make decisions on complaints
+ Democratic: members elect directors at the yearly AGM; members can submit ideas to the website, and upvote other people's ideas; focus groups help frame stories
+ For everyone: content is behind a pay wall, but there are free subscriptions available for those who can't afford to pay

...A society based on transnational solidarity.

Transnational networks and cooperation are well developed and able to address global challenges like pandemics and climate change. Global action has successfully broken up economic monopolies and put safeguards in place to prevent them being recreated. The countries of the UK have acknowledged their colonial legacies and how they affect the present, and found a place in the world based on a reparative justice rather than imperialism.

> Public media institutions across the world are well connected and widely trusted, and local reporters (rather than foreign correspondents) tell their own stories. UK media holds the government and other institutions to account in how they exercise their power, by investing in transnational investigations, engaging in peace journalism[23] and amplifying relevant stories from global public media. A handful of private media no longer dominate the media landscape, with strict limits on cross media ownership and measures to break up companies that become too powerful.

...A society that centres public ownership.

Public investment is recognised as the best way to provide public goods, and new models of public ownership rather than government ownership – such as community assets – have become the norm. Because they are not profit-driven, these institutions can cooperate with each other much more effectively. The economy is no longer based around overconsumption, and advertising is highly restricted because of its harmful effects on human psychology and the extraction of resources.

> Public interest news is recognised as a crucial public good, and non-commercial media are closely linked to other institutions. Everyone has access to universal free broadband as a public utility, and the digital technologies we use day-to-day are not-for-profit, accountable and under democratic control. Data about how they are being used is transparent so people can tell if they are causing harm, and they facilitate people's off-line lives rather than trying to be as addictive as possible. Media are largely funded publicly and through subscription.

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[23] See http://www.peacejournalism.org/

...A society that uses data for the public good.

Privacy and the non-commercial use of data is guaranteed.

Digital monopolies have been broken up or been taken into public ownership. There is a Public Service Internet that is advertising free and not-for-profit. Data is no longer treated as a commodity, but as an important public good. Digital applications collect minimal data for use by public/not-for-profit services and there are strong accountability measures to ensure this. Because people trust that their data won't be misused, they are more willing to share personal data in limited settings, for example donating it for non-profit research.

PUBLIC DIGITAL MEDIA IN TAIWAN

Taiwan has been leading experiments with digital democracy since 2014, when activists involved with the Sunflower Movement were invited to collaborate with government. Using a platform called vTaiwan, citizens have been able to inform and guide government policy on a range of issues, such as whether Uber should be allowed to operate in the country. vTaiwan is hosted on an open source platform called Polis, which is designed to help groups find consensus, unlike commercial platforms which highlight the most divisive and controversial content in order to keep people clicking.

During the pandemic, the advantages of having public digital infrastructure which contributes to constructive relationships between citizens and government have become very apparent. Taiwan has been very successful at controlling the pandemic – with fewer than 900 Covid deaths in the first 18 months – with minimal restrictions on civil liberties. Digital minister Audrey Tang has described their approach as 'fast, fair and fun':

+ Fast: They were one of the first countries in the world to take action, after ministers picked up discussions about the situation in China on message boards in late 2019.

+ Fair: They created digital tools to distribute resources fairly, such as an app showing stock levels of masks of pharmacies, and a chat bot for health enquiries.

+ Fun: Memes are used to share public health messages e.g. using the government's 'spokesdog', Zongchai - in the hope that by making accurate information appealing and fun it will get shared faster than disinformation.

Using non-commmercial digital tools to build trust between citizens and government has helped Taiwan to have a far more unified response and far lower deaths at a time of national crisis.

The Media Commons

The previous section was a long-term vision of what a society that can meet the challenges ahead could look like. But we don't need to wait for this level of transformation to start imagining and building a media commons. The next sections outline our vision for an Independent Media Commons and a People's BBC and Channel 4, and concrete proposals for getting there.

The Independent Media Commons

The best examples of 'media commoning' today can be found within independent and community media organisations. As described in our **case studies**, there are many examples of media cooperatives, community radio stations and open source digital innovators showing how communities can successfully manage shared resources to serve the common good. These need to be recognised as playing as important a role in social life as our public broadcasters, and suppo rted and expanded to reach all communities.

Taken together, these initiatives can be seen as the beginnings of an Independent Media Commons. Yet while they serve huge numbers of people, they often do so with minimal resources. A 2021 survey found that 56 independent news outlets were reaching 10 million monthly unique users, on annual revenues of under £5.4m.[24] Ofcom found that the 251 community radio stations licenced in 2019 had a median income of around £32,000 per station.[25] Digital initiatives struggle to access financial support unless they take money from the tech giants. And even relatively successful and well-established organisations such as the Bristol Cable are struggling to develop sustainable business models.

As argued by the Forum for Information and Democracy,[26] market conditions make it necessary for governments to step into the gap and create enabling environments for this kind of innovation. We believe that significant investment is needed to expand and develop the Independent Media Commons, building on what we already have and allowing new initiatives to spread to underrepresented communities and serve growing local news deserts.

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[24] Public Interest News Foundation (2021)
[25] Ofcom 2020
[26] A New Deal for Journalism (2021)

Imagining the Independent Media Commons

A flourishing IMC would contain the kinds of institutions and initiatives that we already have today, connected into a nationwide network. While it would grow from the bottom up, so wouldn't be a single uniform system, it would be present everywhere. Imagine if every high street had a media hub where journalists could meet residents who had a story to tell, and support them to investigate local issues with their neighbours. Or imagine if every town had a bustling community radio station, which worked with theatres and schools to produce radio plays on the topics local people thought were important.

This ecology of news and cultural producers would be connected to one another through new surveillance-free digital platforms, and investment in digital tools would have transformed people's relationships with data. Citizens would have access to non-profit social media platforms and search engines to help them communicate and collaborate with each other, and they would get to be part of making decisions about how the data produced by local public bodies was used for the common good. They would also be able to easily move off corporate social media platforms, which would have been required to make their services compatible with competing networks.

THE UNIVERSITY AS A MEDIA HUB

Many universities have strong connections to local media. For example, journalism students at the University of Sunderland work alongside members of the community at Spark Sunderland, the local community radio station, and students at Goldsmiths create local news for the East London Lines website. Universities can also act as hubs for innovation and accessing resources. A prime example of this is Cardiff University, which has been a key player in a number of initiatives such as:

+   The Independent Community News Network (ICNN), the UK's representative body for the independent news sector, which is hosted by the university's Centre for Community Journalism. At the time of writing, ICNN had 125 members with a collective online reach of 22 million monthly page views. ICNN has been part of developing Ping!, a news delivery platform to prevent local journalists from having original content plagiarised and create a steady revenue stream.

+   Clwstwr, a Research & Development (R&D) partnership between higher education and creative industries, led by Cardiff University in partnership with University of South Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University. It brings together screen industry businesses, organisations and professionals, and related supply chains, to create new products, services and experiences for screen.

+   The University led the media.cymru consortium, which secured £50 million of funding in 2021 to create digital infrastructure, focusing on emerging technologies, increasing small businesses capacity for innovation, and addressing skills needs.

The Independent Media Commons would have a supportive and collaborative relationship with our national broadcasters. Some high-cost formats such as full-length dramas would continue to be made by legacy broadcasters, but short form video content produced from the Independent Media Commons would have prime-time slots (following the model of Video Nation Shorts - see the **Access TV case study** below).

Initiatives in the IMC would continue to generate their own income through ethical advertising, subscription or other business activities, but would also be able to access significant new public funding of £1 billion a year.[27] These would be distributed through a network of Regional and National Media Councils to support news, cultural content and digital innovation. All projects funded would be Open Source and/or released under Creative Commons licences, so others could repurpose them in creative, non-commercial ways.

The IMC would be held to the values of the media commons in numerous ways, including:

Independent: maintaining the independence of the IMC would be paramount, recognising that relying on public money can distort the way that media work (just as having to serve commercial interests can distort it). Mechanisms for ensuring independence would include devolved and participatory decision-making for how money was distributed, having independence as a key criteria for receiving funds, and having strong safeguards around profit-making and community ownership of assets to prevent commercial players from exploiting this.

Accountable: regulation should be undertaken by a network of independent bodies sitting at the same scale as funding and decision-making, with a national ombudsman as a backstop. News journalism organisations should be members of a Leveson-compliant regulator such as IMPRESS. However, the main thrust of accountability should be towards communities, who should be enabled to define harm and determine what constitutes appropriate redress.

Democratic: funding distributed through the National and Regional Media Councils should use participatory methods to evaluate and select applicants, drawing on participatory budgeting, participatory grantmaking and digital citizenship initiatives. This could take different forms, for example by having an elected board, selecting participants randomly from the electoral roll, or using digital tools to bring large groups to consensus (as in Taiwan). The key criteria for distributing funds should be the extent to which applicants fit with the principles of the media commons – how are they independent, accountable, democratic and serving everyone within a given community.

For everyone: All content funded by the Media Councils should be shared on platforms with strong accessibility principles,[28] and freely available and reusable under Creative Commons licences.

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[27] In line with the recommendations of the Forum on Information and Democracy, this should come out of general taxation, on the understanding that transnational tax issues have been resolved and tech giants are contributing a far fairer proportion of revenues. (E.g. the 15% global corporation tax level agreed at the G7 is estimated to be worth an extra £7.9 billion in additional UK tax.) The exact level of funding, like our proposals for the licence fee, should be determined by an agency which is independent of government. [28] i.e. being perceivable, operable, understandable and robust - see Bureau of Internet Accessibility (2019) What are the four major categories of accessibility?

Building the Independent Media Commons

The idea of the IMC is ambitious, and the next steps towards it are necessarily small in comparison to the transformation we are proposing. The starting point would be increasing investment in the independent, community and digital media who are leading the way in developing an Independent Media Commons, through measures such as:

+ **Provide support for community buyouts of local commercial newspapers which are under threat of closure.**

+ **Establish National and Regional Media Councils to distribute new and substantial funds to non-profit independent media organisations, using participatory methods of decision-making.**

+ **Create a new legal structure for public interest news organisations that has some of the tax benefits of charities, on condition that they are regulated by IMPRESS.**

+ **Support the creation of new partnerships between local authorities, universities and independent content producers to facilitate a network of media hubs around the UK, which can work with local communities, train content producers and share locally produced news and cultural content.**

+ **Restore the Community Radio Fund to an equivalent level per station as when it was launched in 2005[29] - around £10 million for today's 300 stations.**

+ **Open up the Audio Content Fund to Community Radio stations, rather than limiting applications to independent producers.**

+ **Maintain protections for Community Radio as they migrate to local DAB platforms to avoid commercial takeover – in particular, maintaining regulations around only being able to run individual stations.**

+ **When local authorities, combined authorities, and metro mayors are procuring goods and services, the use of data for local public good should be included in agreements.[30]**

+ **Create a network of Data Trusts[31] to steward and govern the sharing of data for the public benefit.**

As part of the Media Commons such initiatives need to be clearly oriented to public benefit, and not-for-profit or low profit media organisations.

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[29] In 2005, £500,000 was split between 14 stations.
[30] James Meadway (2020) Creating a Digital Commons
[31] Jack Hardinges (2018) What is a Data Trust?

A People's BBC and Channel 4

Our UK public broadcasters, the BBC and Channel 4, play an essential role in today's media landscape. (S4C also plays a distinctive role in Wales - see the **S4C case study**). Far from making them obsolete, the growth of international streaming services like Netflix and Disney make it more important than ever that there is a sustainable sector providing the content that they won't.[32] Yet we cannot simply defend the institutions as they are, and have to recognise the extent to which government interference, funding cuts and the need to make a profit can undermine their public missions.

There is also untapped potential to transform these institutions, by devolving decision-making and using digital technologies to make them far more democratic and participatory. This is a more holistic transformation than just a list of policy demands – it is about fundamentally reimagining the relationship between our public media and the people who fund, rely on and care for them. So what could a People's BBC and Channel 4 look like, as part of a thriving media commons?

INVESTIGATING DELIVEROO

In 2021, an investigation into Deliveroo was released showing that many couriers were earning less than minimum wage. This was the outcome of a partnership between the Daily Mirror, ITV News and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. The project had been launched in late 2020, inviting people to submit ideas for investigations about precarious work. Three 'participant journalists' – two of whom worked for delivery companies – were paid to design and guide the investigation. Data was gathered from 300 riders, and more than 10 were interviewed on the record – a level of access that was only possible because of the trusting relationships that already existed with the participant journalists.

The story ran in the Mirror and on ITV lunchtime and evening news. Local partners around the country published versions tailored to their local area, and the story was discussed in the Financial Times and New York Times. It showed how collaboration across platforms and different types of media organisations was possible and how more participatory methods could be brought into broadcasting.

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[32] While the government's definition of 'distinctively British content' is overly narrow, the principle of ensuring that content produced here reflects British lives is valuable.

Imagining a People's BBC and Channel 4

As part of the media commons, the BBC and Channel 4 would be widely trusted and embedded in people's lives. The content they provide would be seen as distinctive and valuable, and there would be widespread support paying for them collectively through a fair licence fee and taxation.

There would be a different kind of relationship between the institutions and the wider public. Rather than just interacting with them as passive audiences, most people would take part in 'commoning' practices that ensure the institutions are independent, accountable, democratic and for everyone. They would participate in making decisions about how they are run – whether that's electing decision-makers to represent them, being part of participatory commissioning or sitting on a panel to oversee coverage of controversial issues. Rather than being distant, abstract institutions, the relationship would be much more local and immediate, with most decisions being made regionally, and workers being representative of all the communities of the UK. S4C would represent the full diversity of Welsh speakers today, and its content would be easily accessible and enjoyed across the UK.

The digital infrastructure to support the People's BBC and Channel 4, as well as other kinds of participation in democratic life, would be the responsibility of a British Digital Cooperative. This would work with public media, such as developing algorithms for video on demand services, and also channel large-scale investment to surveillance-free, non-profit digital platforms (e.g. search engines and social networks), so citizens have genuine choices about whether they want to use commercial platforms.

A People's BBC and Channel 4 would also have a collaborative relationship with organisations within the Independent Media Commons, distributing news and cultural content from these smaller producers to wider audiences. All these measures would mean that the news and information coming from these institutions would be widely trusted to be accurate and to hold powerful interests in wider society to account; the data they produce would be used for the public good; and the cultural content would be innovative, representative of diverse lives, and foster creativity all across the UK.

ACCESS TV:
BBC COMMUNITY PROGRAMME UNIT AND CHANNEL 4 WORKSHOPS

The Community Programme Unit (CPU) at the BBC launched in 1973 and existed until the early 2000's. Initially this was a slot called Open Door (later Open Space), where individuals and organisations could write in with an idea for a programme, and if it was selected by staff and advisers they would be supported to make it while retaining editorial control. When lightweight camcorders became available individuals were trained to use them, and these were broadcast as Video Diaries and Video Nation. From 1992, the unit housed the Disability Programs Unit which was staffed by disabled people and provided a training ground for people with disabilities to enter television.

When Channel 4 was set up in 1982, this ethos of 'access TV' was embedded in its design. One way they did this in the early years was by supporting alternative film and video collectives known as Workshops - providing secure and properly paid work for their members. Franchised Workshops had to include educational activities and provide film and video equipment to wider communities, alongside producing programmes which were screened on Channel 4. These Workshops were drawn from outside the mainstream, and groups that benefited included the Black Audio Collective and the Asian film collective Retake.

These programmes provided space for unrepresented and misrepresented groups to speak for themselves on mainstream platforms - early Open Door Programmes included groundbreaking pieces about racism on TV and challenging homophobic narratives early on in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. A stark contrast with mainstream coverage was seen during the miners strike. While mainstream BBC news had shown footage from Orgreave from behind police lines, which made it look as though miners were the aggressors, a later CPU programme, Taking Liberties, broadcast amateur footage which showed that the police began the violence. Similarly, the Channel 4 film and video workshops created the Miners Campaign Tapes which told the story from the miners' perspectives, and created a source of income from the sale of cassette tapes.

Building a People's BBC and Channel 4

As part of the Media Commons our public service broadcasters should be guaranteed to be:

Independent:
Able to hold powerful interests to account

Our public broadcasters need to be independent of powerful interests so they can hold the powerful to account and stay true to their public mission. This means being genuinely independent of government, as well as from commercial interests. When either making money or not offending the government becomes the priority, the core mission to serve the public gets watered down. Their independence should be protected through measures such as:

+ **The BBC's public funding levels should be determined by a fully independent body that is protected from government pressure, and can respond swiftly to market pressures and technological change (such as rapid growth of streaming services).**

+ **The BBC's Royal Charter should be replaced with a proper legal structure for public service media, so that its remit and constitution can be properly scrutinised by Parliament rather than unilaterally changed by government. After this, future changes should be made through regular reviews which are voted on by license fee payers.**

+ **Senior appointments at the BBC and Channel 4 should be removed from government control.**

+ **Within the new legal framework for public service broadcasting, Channel 4 should be protected from government interference and threats of privatisation.**

+ **Channel 4 should become an advertising-free platform, funded by a UK cross-platform digital advertising levy, which is safeguarded from government interference. This will allow it to focus on creating great programmes for the public rather than providing audiences for advertisers.**

+ **Journalists within public broadcasting should be protected by a conscience clause, allowing them to refuse unethical assignments. The BBC and Channel 4 should be transparent about how they monitor their workers' social media profiles.**

Accountable:
Facing consequences when they do harm

Our public broadcasters have a huge influence on public conversations, and are capable of causing significant harm by the things they do and don't say. We need them to be accountable for this harm and to learn from their mistakes. This means a truly independent regulator and effective and accessible complaints mechanisms. They should be held accountable through measures such as:

+ **A new independent regulator, dedicated to the media commons, should be established. This should act purely in the public interest and be responsible for the regulation of the BBC, other public service media, and public service content in commercial broadcasting. This regulator should take over these responsibilities from Ofcom, allowing Ofcom to focus on its other duties. The new regulator should develop a shared architecture with other regulators such as IMPRESS (which would continue to focus on the independent journalism sector) e.g. ensuring complaints are dealt with swiftly.**

+ **The new regulator should also be responsible for online regulation, including harmful content, the impact of algorithms and harmful design.**

+ **All appointments to the new regulator should be independent of government, and senior appointments should be accountable to audiences e.g. through being elected.**

+ **The new regulator should be adequately funded to fulfil its remit, deal promptly with complaints, conduct research and launch detailed investigations so as to minimise harm. The complaints process should be simple and effective so that it is transparent and accessible to everyone.**

+ **The regulator should draw on the Citizen Media Assemblies to ensure public participation in defining what is harmful, what is meaningful redress, and keeping people informed about their rights, especially in the rapidly changing online environment.**

+ **The regulator should include a racism reporting service to map and address racism within public media,[33] promote the use of appropriate language by journalists e.g. to describe disabled people,[34] and monitor and address workplace harassment and bullying.**

+ **All media content should be subject to a 'right to reply' so valid complaints are able to broadcast or publish counter responses from affected people and communities, with equal prominence to the content complained about.**

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[33] Marcus Ryder (2020) Race to be Heard
[34] NUJ Disability Handbook

Democratic:
Participatory and representative of diverse lives

Our public broadcasters need to become far more representative of wider society, and provide far more avenues for audiences to participate in how media are produced, taking advantage of the opportunities that digital technologies provide for giving audiences a meaningful say in how public institutions are run. They should be made more democratic through measures such as:

+ **Programme making and editorial functions - including how money is distributed - should be fully devolved to the nations and regions, so that programmes fully represent the needs and desires of the whole country.**

+ **National and regional boards of the BBC and Channel 4 should have worker representation, and also involve the wider public e.g. through allowing licence fee payers to elect members.**

+ **A devolved network of Citizen Media Assemblies should be established to manage commissioning, so more people can have a say on the programmes that get made. These could be structured using the 15 existing BBC nations and regions divisions.[35] Citizen Media Assembly boards should be elected by staff and local licence fee payers, and quotas and affirmative action should be used to ensure broad-based representation.**

+ **News coverage should be regularly reviewed to assess whether it meaningfully represents diverse views and communities, and whether it over-represents official and elite sources. For complex or controversial issues, panels drawn from Citizen Media Assemblies should be established to oversee reporting.[36]**

+ **New forms of participatory commissioning should be developed by Citizen Media Assemblies. These commissioning processes should draw on the history of the BBC Community Programme Unit and Channel 4 workshops, as well as forms of collective resource distribution such as participatory budgeting and grantmaking.**

+ **Both the BBC and Channel 4 should ensure that their workers are representative of wider society, including trainees and those working for external content producers. Rigorous equality monitoring data should be collected to support this, including data on job roles and pay grades. Reasonable adjustments for disabled people should be publicised during recruitment, and incorporated into internal training to ensure managers understand them.**

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[35] Map of BBC TV regions.
[36] As briefly attempted with Brexit.

+ **The BBC and Channel 4 should have formal obligations to address casualisation and precarious working conditions, so it's easier for people who aren't wealthy to work for them. BECTU and the NUJ should be involved in developing contracts, which should also take account of the impact of worker rights within the institutions on the wider media sector. Freelancers should also be protected e.g. through implementation of the Freelancers Charter.[37]**

+ **A British Digital Cooperative should be established to develop a surveillance-free public platform architecture to include social media, search and other information-sorting and communication utilities to enable citizens to interact with one another and develop resources for social and political communication.[38]**

S4C: SERVING WELSH SPEAKERS

S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru/ the Welsh fourth channel) was launched in 1982 and is the world's only Welsh television service. It has been described as "one of the essential cornerstones of [Welsh] culture" and is widely viewed by its audience as helping to maintain Welsh as a relevant and modern language.[39] While it is independent of the BBC, since 2013 its public funding has been almost entirely through the BBC licence fee rather than a separate grant. (This coincided with a real-terms funding cut of around a third.) Like other broadcasters it is struggling to achieve prominence online, and faces additional barriers given that English is so dominant on US-based digital platforms. However, its short-form online brand Hansh has been highly successful at reaching 16-34 year olds, who are often disengaged from content from legacy broadcasters.

While S4C is far smaller than the BBC or Channel 4, it has a closer relationship with its audience and at times has been able to be responsive to their needs in a distinctive way. At the start of the pandemic, for example, a series of Facebook Live sessions were held with viewers, and new programmes – including broadcasting church services, resources to support children's home learning, and re-released archive content – were commissioned as a result. S4C also supported the production sector in Wales by holding an emergency commissioning round within weeks of the first lockdown. Some of these developments within S4C are a potential model for what a devolved and participatory BBC could look like across the whole of the UK.

[37] The Coalition for Change Freelancers' Charter
[38] Dan Hind (2019) The British Digital Cooperative
[39] Euryn Ogwen Williams (2018) Building an S4C for the future.

For everyone:
Serving everybody's needs and accessible to all

Our public broadcasters have a remit to provide a universal service. This means recognising the different needs and desires of particular groups – including their accessibility needs – while also creating shared spaces for engaging with the issues that affect us all. And it also means being affordable to all. They should be serve everyone through measures such as:

+ **The television licence fee should be replaced with a progressive license pegged to household council tax bands, so that wealthier people contribute more.**

+ **Affordable full fibre broadband should be guaranteed to all homes.**

+ **England should adopt the same obligations to provide British Sign Language interpretation for news as exists in Wales and Scotland.**

+ **The BBC should be used as a mechanism for raising accessibility standards online, by creating digital tools for readability etc and making them publicly available on Creative Commons licences.**

+ **The whole of the BBC archive should be made permanently publicly accessible worldwide on Creative Commons licences.**

+ **Algorithms on the iPlayer and 4oD should be redesigned to encourage people to encounter a variety of content, similar to the broadcasting schedule, rather than emphasising similarity. These algorithms should be made public to ensure transparency.**

+ **Channel 4's remit should be strengthened and refocused on serving minority audiences, and supporting innovative programming and film production.**

OPTIONS FOR THE LICENCE FEE

In **Finland,** public media is funded through a progressive individual tax, which is free for those on the lowest incomes. It sits outside the state budget to ensure independence.

In **Germany**, funding is provided by a household levy paid by everyone, rather than based on owning a particular device. It is a flat rate per household, but people who receive certain kinds of benefits can get a reduction or exemption. The rate is decided by an independent body.

In **Croatia**, they briefly experimented with citizen grants for journalism – where every citizen could select from a list of eligible non-profit outlets, who would then be awarded a donation from a public fund. This was discontinued in 2016, probably to curb dissent of the government, showing the importance of placing decisions for these schemes within independent bodies.

Conclusion

The 2020s are set to be a decade of huge challenges - whether that's the climate crisis, public health emergencies, or the possible break up of the UK. All too often, the UK's media fail to confront the problems we face. But it doesn't have to be this way – and when we look at the best of our public media and the independent sector we can see the seeds of a new future, where our media are an active part of finding solutions, and supporting the transformations we need.

This manifesto outlines a vision for a media with the public interest, community empowerment and collective care at its heart: a system we are calling a media commons. This media commons will contain a People's BBC and Channel 4, which are truly independent, accountable, democratic and for everyone. And it will contain an Independent Media Commons – a thriving ecology of participatory newsrooms, community radio stations, digital innovators and cultural producers, supported by significant public resources to tell the stories of all the UK's communities.

Our vision is ambitious, but there is no denying that change is coming. Our future could be further dominated by media and tech monopolies, who have no sustainable answers to the challenges we face. Or it could be a future defined by 'commoning' - working together to manage the resources that we all rely on and care for.

The media commons is the future we need. The first step is to imagine it. Then we can begin to build it.

BBC AND BEYOND

Imagining a media commons