

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





# Manifesto for a People's Media

Written by Deborah Grayson for the Media Reform Coalition,  
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# Summary and demands

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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<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>The Media Manifesto (2020)

<sup>2</sup>The Media Manifesto (2020)



# The Independent Media Commons

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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<sup>3</sup> - 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<sup>4</sup>**

**Create a network of Data Trusts<sup>5</sup> to steward and govern the sharing of data for the public benefit**

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<sup>3</sup>In 2005, £500,000 was split between 14 stations.

<sup>4</sup>James Meadway (2020) Creating a Digital Commons

<sup>5</sup>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<sup>6</sup>, promote the use of appropriate language by journalists e.g. to describe disabled people<sup>7</sup>, 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.**

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Ryder (2020) Race to be Heard

<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup>. 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<sup>9</sup>.**
- + 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.**

<sup>8</sup> Map of BBC TV regions.

<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup>.**
- + **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<sup>11</sup>.**

## **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.**

<sup>10</sup> The Coalition for Change Freelancers' Charter

<sup>11</sup> Dan Hind (2019) The British Digital Cooperative