



Our Mutual Friend: The BBC in the Digital Age

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Executive Summary

By the end of 2027 the government is required to review and renew the BBC’s Royal Charter, which will set the terms for how the BBC operates in the digital media landscape of the future. Lisa Nandy, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, has said that she wants the BBC to be transformed into a mutual organisation:

I’d like to see us mutualise the BBC so that those decisions are taken by a wider group of people ... This will mean a new structure for the BBC Board that focuses on genuine public representation and participation.

She was explicit that mutualisation should not be merely symbolic, but needs to have significant consequences for the distribution of decision-making:

I’d like to see us not just move the headquarters of Channel 4 and the BBC out of London but commissioning power too, so what gets made and what gets said is not determined by a small group of men behind a desk in Westminster and Whitehall.

In this paper we set out how to mutualise the BBC by transforming it into a new kind of institution: a public service mutual, owned and controlled by the British public.

In the first section we sketch the context in which the BBC finds itself. We summarise and assess the various criticisms levelled against it, and discuss the implications of rapid technological change and rising public mistrust for the future of the BBC as a public media institution.

In the second section we explain how mutual principles can help address the challenges the BBC faces, and how these principles might best be applied in a large, publicly funded, media institution.

In the third and final section we set out one possible institutional structure that embodies these principles, and explain the difference that mutualisation will make – not only to the BBC, but to the country as a whole, and to all of us who live here.

At the heart of this mutualised BBC are two new powers, which will become the shared possession of all of its members. First, every one of us will have the right to distribute a sum drawn from the BBC’s budget to journalistic, cultural and educational projects that we wish to support. Second, every one of us will have the right to sit on randomly selected panels that oversee, and help shape, the BBC’s operations.

The interactions of these new powers will mean that the public are actively and directly involved in setting the BBC’s strategy, shaping its day-to-

day operations, and holding the BBC's management to account. This new public service mutualism will energise the BBC, connect it to the audiences it serves, secure its independence from politicians and vested interests, and help it to become a leading organisation in the digital media space. Our active and direct participation, and the new kinds of knowledge it generates, will be key to the survival of the BBC in the years ahead.

When the next BBC Royal Charter takes effect, interactive digital platforms and personalised streaming services will have replaced broadcasting as the central means by which we make sense of the world through news, entertainment and culture. The BBC will either take a leading role in this new media and communications landscape, or it will fade into irrelevance.

If the BBC is to survive and flourish it will need to become a new kind of institution, one in which the active and direct participation of citizens informs and invigorates the BBC's public service mission. This is why we agree with Lisa Nandy that mutualisation is the right way forward for the BBC. Without it, the BBC faces a bleak future of dwindling audiences, collapsing funding and continued political interference.

Many people across the political spectrum would be happy to see the BBC left in its current form in the next Charter period. Some will convince

themselves that deep reform is not necessary. Others will calculate that an unreformed BBC will not long survive in the digital era, and they are eager to rule over the ruins. While some defenders of the BBC may be satisfied with tinkering at the edges, it is only the BBC's competitors and opponents who will benefit from frustrating Lisa Nandy's vision of an institution in which we all have a stake and a voice.

Proposals for the substantive mutualisation of one of the UK's most important institutions are bound to be controversial. This paper is not intended to be the last word, but rather an early contribution to what we hope will be intense popular deliberations in the three years before the implementation of the new Royal Charter. Never before has serious and sustained thought been given to what it would take to mutualise a large, public service media organisation. It would be surprising if we hit on the perfect approach at the first try.

The Chairman of the BBC, Samir Shah, recently said that he wishes to 'democratise the debate around the BBC's future.' This gives us an opportunity to test the innovations we propose in the forthcoming public debates and consultations around BBC Charter renewal. After all, if the review process is to be open, deliberative and democratic, it is hard to see how it can avoid trialling the individual and collective powers we propose. If we are wrong, and

ordinary people have no place in the formal processes and structures of a public media organisation, then our error will soon be discovered. But we predict that a democratic consultation process will reveal what countless

similar exercises in recent years have discovered: 'ordinary people' have far more to offer to the work of collective sense-making than many politicians and media executives are comfortable admitting.

Introduction

In 2027 the BBC will celebrate its centenary as a chartered corporation. In the midst of the festivities it will be negotiating with the government the terms on which it will operate over the course of its tenth Royal Charter. For a hundred years the BBC has been at the heart of the British media system, and has served as a model and exemplar for public media around the world. Media systems have changed almost beyond recognition in that time. A hundred years ago the BBC was a radio broadcaster enjoying a national monopoly. Today it provides a host of television channels, radio stations and online platforms, including the BBC News website, the iPlayer and BBC Sounds. It operates alongside public and private rivals, and its programmes are available to global audiences, largely via commercial platforms.

Despite its previous successes in adapting to new technologies, the BBC's future in the digital age looks uncertain. It remains extremely popular in the UK as a source of news and information. But multinational digital platforms and video-on-demand services – free from any obligation to provide information, education or content that reflects the lives and cultures of the UK – dwarf the BBC financially. Broadcasters are losing ground to social media platforms as providers of news, especially among younger people. And as the BBC itself has commercialised its operations,

it has increasingly struggled to maintain its identity as a public service media company.

Trust in the BBC's news coverage remains high compared to many private competitors, especially the UK's tabloid press. But it has been hit by public scandals and controversies involving prominent BBC personalities. It has also suffered from a broader loss of public confidence in both political institutions and the major media that organise news coverage around them. The BBC's history and reputation are rightly considered assets it can exploit politically and commercially, but its place within the British establishment is increasingly a reputational liability. The British news media is the least trusted in the twenty-eight countries surveyed for the latest Edelman Trust Barometer,¹ and this disconnect has been further documented in qualitative academic studies.²

In every decade since its incorporation in 1927, the BBC's operations have been reviewed, and its constitution revised, by central government. There have been nine BBC Royal Charters, as well as several supplements and amendments. (The 2017 Charter, unlike its predecessors, runs for eleven years and so its successor will come into effect one year after the BBC's centenary year.) But for all that the BBC has changed in terms of its constitution, organisational culture

and operations, it retains many striking similarities with the BBC created by Stanley Baldwin. Its mechanisms of democratic accountability all run through the government, which retains control over appointments to the BBC Board, the Royal Charter renewal process and the value of the licence fee, the BBC's major source of income. Its political reporting remains overwhelmingly orientated to Westminster and the dominant political players within it. In its early years the BBC was forbidden from producing original journalism and was obliged to take content from the private newswire companies. Today, although it has significant resources devoted to news journalism, a similar sort of relationship exists, as the BBC continues to rely on the private media as an arbiter of political opinion and controversy, and follows the agenda of the commercial sector in deciding which topics to cover.

The BBC's commitment to impartial reporting, central to its legitimacy as a publicly-funded news organisation, can be traced back to the intellectual and bureaucratic culture of the British Empire. The BBC's first Director-General and 'founding father', John Reith, was strongly committed to a Victorian vision of public service, and the BBC's ethos of impartiality was inherited from the Civil Service and the professions. Immediately after World War One Walter Lippmann drew on his admiration of the British Foreign Office to recommend that the instruction of the public be entrusted to 'men

who are not personally involved, who control enough facts, and have the dialectical skill to sort out what is real perception from what is stereotype, pattern and elaboration.'³ The BBC's vision of itself as a professional and dispassionate bastion of impartiality is a relic of the late Empire, which has survived into the present day.

The BBC's relationship to its public is not as remote, or as candidly patrician, as in earlier years. Indeed it has gone to great lengths to reflect the diversity of the country it serves. It also now benefits from access to extensive audience data via industry surveys and its digital platforms. Competition from the private sector and the need to convene large audiences continues to make it acutely interested in producing popular entertainment. But while many of us feel an emotional connection to the BBC, very few of us have any understanding of its inner workings. Despite being publicly-owned and funded directly by its audiences, nobody in the general public has any direct influence or say over the BBC's activities or strategy.

The BBC's next Royal Charter, which will take effect in January 2028, will define its role, purpose and constitution as it moves into its second century. While the contents of the Charter will be crucial for the future of the BBC, and for public media more broadly, it will also have a profound impact on the politics and culture of the United Kingdom. The next

iteration of the BBC will, for good or ill, help to define what the UK is, and what its people can achieve, for many years to come.

In this paper we argue for a new model of public media, built on a mutualised BBC in which its members – the British public – play an active and direct role in its governance, funding and functions. In doing so we take seriously well-founded criticisms of the BBC as it exists today, while recognising the need to fortify it against malicious and duplicitous attacks. Our objective is to put the BBC on a secure foundation, preserving what it does best, as the media environment shifts from the twentieth century's

characteristic mix of print and broadcast to this century's digital-first structures of interactive communication. Public media can, and should, provide a forum for democratic public deliberation: a space in which we can see ourselves as we are, and reflect on the conditions of our shared life. But if we want the BBC to be the centre of a digital media and communications system that truly serves the public, we will have to replace a vague sense of shared ownership with a constitutional structure that embeds the public as active and direct participants in the BBC's operations. It is for this reason that we make the case here for a mutualised BBC.

1. A Predicament, a Crisis, or Something Worse?

In this first section, we describe the current context in which the BBC finds itself. We summarise and assess the various criticisms levelled against it, and discuss the implications of rapid technological change and rising public mistrust for the future of the BBC as a public media institution. This provides important context to our discussion of mutual principles, and our outline of the institutional structures that we believe can best embody such principles at the BBC, in Sections Two and Three respectively. Readers broadly familiar with the political and technological context in which the BBC operates, and the significant challenges it faces, but less familiar with the principles and practicalities of mutualisation, may wish to skip to Section Two.

Political criticisms of the BBC

Because of its remit to deliver a universal public service – providing content and services that serve the needs and interests of all audiences – the BBC has inevitably faced a range of sometimes contradictory criticisms. The most prominent have come from the political right, largely because of the influence of the UK's conservative print media. Two, sometimes overlapping, conservative critiques of the BBC – economic and cultural – became especially

prominent in the 1970s, and have been fairly consistent ever since.

Firstly, the free market right has been hostile to public funding for the media in general, and the BBC licence fee in particular. Its advocates argue that state support is unnecessary, unfair, inefficient, and anticompetitive, and that it hinders the development of private media which would be more responsive to audience interests and tastes. This has led to support for various kinds of commercialisation of the BBC – a process which has been ongoing since the 1980s – all the way to full privatisation.⁴

The right's cultural critique of the BBC, meanwhile, alleges that its output is marred by a left-wing or liberal bias, with the terms often used interchangeably. In the context of news and current affairs, the claim is that the corporation is unsympathetic to business and enterprise, and that it is subtly (or not so subtly) hostile to conservative thinking and the Conservative Party. The BBC has been accused of being insufficiently patriotic, exhibiting an unthinking metropolitan and liberal-left political perspective. In foreign affairs it is thought to be insufficiently supportive of the United States and its regional allies.⁵ In the context of cultural production, the socially conservative right claims BBC programmes are 'politically correct',

or more recently ‘woke’, or acts as a Trojan Horse for what used to be called ‘the permissive society’.⁶

Claims of liberal-left bias at the BBC have been supported by some prominent former BBC journalists and presenters. One characteristic example of this can be found in the memoirs of Peter Sissons, who complained that ‘at the core of the BBC, in its very DNA, is a mindset, a way of thinking, and an approach to ordering journalistic priorities, that is of the left but not defined in any conventional political way.’⁷ John Humphrys, for decades a presenter on Radio 4’s flagship current affairs programme *Today*, similarly wrote in his biography of ‘institutional liberal bias’ at the BBC, and a ‘fear’ of ‘the politically correct brigade’⁸. It is probably true that many BBC staff members, probably a majority of these outside of senior management and onscreen ‘talent’, think of themselves in such terms. But it is much less clear that this subjective identification plays out as an objectively left-wing bias in news and current affairs coverage, or in cultural and educational content.

Indeed, there are grounds for thinking that even core principles of liberalism, such as anti-racism, can be downplayed or dismissed by the BBC in certain circumstances. In 2019 the Executive Complaints Unit (ECU) found that a BBC journalist, Naga Munchetty, had breached the corporation’s guidelines when discussing racist

and offensive remarks made by the US President Donald Trump. More than forty distinguished British broadcasters and journalists of colour wrote an open letter to the BBC in which they accused the ECU of ‘a form of racially discriminatory treatment towards BAME people who work on programming’ and pointed out that ‘racism is not a valid opinion on which an “impartial” stance can or should be maintained.’⁹ In recent years the conservative critique of the BBC has been mirrored by similar allegations from a liberal-left perspective. This is based around a perceived editorial shift at the BBC under the 2010 Coalition and 2015-2024 Conservative governments, and especially following the 2016 EU Referendum. The criticism of a right-wing bias within the BBC has been linked to controversial political appointments, most famously Robbie Gibb, the former head of communications at 10 Downing Street, who was appointed to the BBC board in 2021. On her departure from the BBC in 2022, the longstanding *Newsnight* presenter Emily Maitlis referred to Gibb as having acted as ‘active agent of the Conservative party.’¹⁰

One criticism which to some extent cuts across left and right – albeit with different conceptions of where power lies – is the claim of a pro-establishment bias: the BBC is accused of aligning itself with the ideas and assumptions of ruling elites. Proponents of this view argue that the BBC’s structure and culture has led to a series of very grave failures in the BBC’s treatment of

core features of political and social life in the United Kingdom and abroad.

The right complains about the BBC's coverage of immigration and the European Union, where, it claims, the establishment common sense tends to marginalise other points of view. The left argues that in matters of political economy BBC managers and editors take their cues from a thought collective organised around Oxbridge, the Treasury and the City of London,¹¹ while in foreign affairs, the basic benevolence of the UK and its close allies is taken for granted, leading to reporting that replicates and reproduces the British state's propaganda. The most egregious recent iteration of the latter tendency has been the reporting of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, and its escalating regional war against its neighbours. In November 2024, 101 of the BBC's own employees, along with another 139 non-BBC media workers, penned a letter to Tim Davie, accusing the corporation of a 'lack of consistently fair and accurate evidence-based journalism in coverage of Gaza'. Echoing other critics, the letter pointed out numerous shortcomings from the BBC's failure to inform the public that Israel has banned journalists from entering Gaza to its consistent downplaying of Israel as 'the perpetrator' of violence.¹²

Assessing the criticisms

At times defenders of the BBC survey their various critics and conclude that, since it provokes hostility from both the 'left' and 'right'

of the political spectrum, it must be doing reasonably well in its mission to provide balanced coverage of controversial issues. But the truth is not necessarily to be found at the midpoint between two contradictory claims. Indeed, the CEO of BBC News and Current Affairs, Deborah Turness, has written: 'We cannot afford to simply say that if both sides are criticising us, we're getting things right. That isn't good enough for the BBC or for our audiences.'¹³ The proper response to allegations of political bias is a thorough-going examination of the evidence, not a complacent celebration of epistemic centrism.

At the level of output, the case for pro-establishment bias can draw on a wealth of scholarly evidence. Content studies have consistently found that BBC news reporting is driven by the statements and actions of leading politicians, state officials, and sources from business and finance. As a result the BBC presents a narrow range of perspectives, and exhibits a lack of balance, on important political issues.¹⁴ Detailed historical and ethnographic studies have revealed the BBC to be a hierarchical organisation with a risk averse conformist culture that exhibits a strong orientation towards Westminster, officialdom and elite institutions and networks more generally.¹⁵

This pro-establishment bias stems both from the BBC's formal structure and from its informal

operating assumptions. Central government controls the periodic renewal of its Charter and its main source of funding, the television licence fee. It also makes key appointments.¹⁶ BBC personnel, especially at senior levels, are drawn from the same social and educational milieu, and economic class, as political and economic elites. Many of them are in day-to-day contact with Parliament and other elite institutions, some of them are former politicians or political advisors, and they rely on the press and other commercial media as a proxy for public opinion.

This critique of BBC reporting is sometimes echoed in the BBC's own research. Ten years ago the BBC's review of its news and current affairs found that the 'most common critique of BBC News and current affairs in the context of trust, accuracy and impartiality was that it was perceived to feel like "part of" the authority and was somehow afraid of challenging institutions and figures in authority.'¹⁷ More recently, Ofcom's review of BBC news and current affairs found that while audiences generally trusted the BBC to report accurately, there was a suspicion that 'the BBC's reporting was influenced by the government because of its funding model.' One focus group member was quoted as saying: 'I trust them to give the facts but I am less trusting that they are not biased towards the government.' This concern was less around political bias *per se*, and more an orientation towards authority, a concern that was especially prevalent amongst younger audiences.¹⁸

Similarly, research by media sociologist Catherine Happer found significant disengagement with the BBC, as well as other mainstream media sources, among lower-income groups from inner-city areas. Happer quotes one focus group participant as saying the BBC and other broadcasters are 'in cahoots with the military, the government, they toe the line and they don't tell you the truth.'¹⁹

Research conducted for Ofcom in 2018 similarly noted that 'the BBC is widely perceived to be a bastion of establishment power, with the bias of a white, middle class, London/South East lens'.²⁰ More recent Ofcom research focused on lower socio-economic groups found that BBC presenters were seen to be 'out of touch with ordinary people, particularly during the current cost-of-living crisis'. There was, the report noted, 'a perception that people in the BBC earned disproportionately high salaries... [reinforcing] the perception that the BBC is run by an exclusive, upper-class group of white men'. This was related to 'a general sense that the BBC does not consider "people like them" when making decisions'.²¹ This disenchantment with the BBC runs alongside a broader loss of confidence in the UK's governing institutions. The most recent British Social Attitudes survey paints a 'picture of a stark decline in trust' in the period after 2019. For example, in 2019 34% of respondents 'almost never trusted' governments to put the nation's interests first. By 2024 that had risen to 45%, the highest the survey has ever recorded.²²

On the question of international affairs, it seems clear to us that the BBC's has amplified official claims in support of US-UK military aggression since 2001, as was most egregiously in the case in the run up to of the invasion of Iraq,²³ and that the BBC's reporting more generally has reflected the interests of the UK state, rather than assuming an impartial position.²⁴ It also seems clear that the BBC was hostile to the Labour Party between 2015 and 2019, when its leadership was opposed to the continuation of the United Kingdom's pro-American foreign policy.²⁵

A substantial body of opinion has concluded that the BBC's coverage of global affairs is so propagandistic that efforts at reform are likely to be futile, and that the institution is best abandoned. We do not share this view. There are many impediments to accurate and impartial reporting on British foreign policy, not least the formal and informal ties between the BBC and the British government. But there are conscientious journalists working for the BBC both in the UK and in the rest of the world. We write this paper because we believe that the institution's reporting can be improved through structural changes to the incentives and threats those journalists must contend with.

The free market argument against public funding for the media simply does not stand up to scrutiny. No developed country has ever relied exclusively on private markets for the production

of news and cultural content. In the United States, for example, where public media has been much more marginal than in the UK, the government funnels vast sums to nominally private entities in the form of subsidies and payments in kind.²⁶ Its Federal Communications Commission grants exclusive use of scarce broadcast spectrum to commercial companies for a fraction of its value, in exchange for their taking on explicit public service obligations and implicit responsibilities in matters of national security. The national television networks were established, and continue to operate, in the shadow of state power. The modern internet was created through massive state investments channelled through the US Department of Defense. Recent moves to expel Chinese state-linked digital platforms from its social media market highlight the extent to which the US state seeks to shape the information environment. It is as active in picking winners in the marketplace of ideas as the UK state, even if it does so without an equivalent of the BBC. Public funding for news media is inevitable. The challenge is to prevent it from being used by unaccountable factions within the state for their own purposes. As we shall argue here, this challenge can only be met by a system of public media structured through, and reinforced by, organised democratic power.

The claim that the BBC's cultural output has become too 'safe' and 'politically correct' is supported by some audience research, although

parts of the BBC, especially BBC Three, are credited by younger audiences for producing more culturally relevant, less risk averse, content.²⁷ This has provided the right with its most consistently effective line of attack. As a large-scale producer and commissioner of drama, comedy and entertainment the BBC is likely to produce material that some people, sometimes many people, will find disturbing, upsetting or offensive. If its creative output tackles controversial issues, as it must do if it is to fulfil its public purposes, this becomes all but inevitable. As long as the BBC strays beyond police procedurals and reality TV promoting competitive individualism, this is a rich vein for the BBC's competitors and opponents in the commercial media to exploit. On the other hand if the BBC stays in its comfort zone the conservative press can complain that it is producing content that the market could provide, and is crowding out the private sector.

Disagreement and contestation around cultural production should be welcomed. But equally it is in everybody's interests that powerful, well organised and lavishly funded public relations operations are not able to exert an outsized cultural influence at the expense of poorer or otherwise more marginal groups. The twentieth century traditions of public service broadcasting were established to guard against commercial interests, and to preserve high standards in news, culture and educational content. However, these traditions don't serve as an adequate

guarantor of vibrant and democratic cultural production in the twenty-first century. While we would certainly question elements of the right-wing critiques of the BBC, we broadly agree that it is not sustainable to leave so much commissioning power in the hands of a socially, geographically and institutionally isolated patriciate.

Mutualisation provides a different model for organising how the BBC sources and produces its core public service content, in both its cultural programming and its news and current affairs output. Political pluralism and cultural diversity are not best served by handing exclusive editorial power to the owners and operators of large profit-driven, often advertising-led, media groups. Rather than removing professional discretion and the public service ethos from the media, the goal must be to reinforce them, by empowering the BBC's audiences as active and informed participants in its operations.

In its current form the BBC has been unable or unwilling to address the often contradictory claims of its critics and to assess their relative merits. The organisation that emerges under the new Charter must be able to do so, and in a manner that secures the respect of those who fund it. In a media environment that rewards sensational claims the BBC must do more than gesture towards an imaginary spectrum and assure those who pay for it that it has found the right point at which to pitch its coverage.

Without substantive reforms, an increasingly disaffected public will abandon the shared spaces for political deliberation, intellectual inquiry and aesthetic reflection that the contemporary BBC claims it wants to provide, and that are the ultimate justification for its receipt of public funding.

The Funding Question

How the BBC is funded, and the level of income that its funding mechanism generates, is fundamental to its purpose and impact as a public service media organisation. The future of the BBC's funding will be a pivotal part of the forthcoming debates and decisions on BBC Charter renewal. The Culture Secretary has publicly suggested that the TV licence fee will almost certainly not be kept in its current form beyond 2027, and stated that the Charter review will consider a range of alternative options, though the government has notably rejected funding the BBC from general taxation.²⁸ The Media Reform Coalition will explore these issues in more detail in future publications. The key point for the present paper is that any decisions on the form and level of the BBC's funding should be made by the public itself, not imposed unilaterally by the government. These issues should be central to an open and comprehensive Charter renewal process founded on public consent.

Given the importance of funding to the governance and culture of the BBC, it is

necessary, nevertheless, to outline some core principles. Widespread criticisms of the current funding model play an essential role in the functioning of, and public attitudes towards, the BBC as a public institution. The TV licence fee has the advantage that it requires the BBC to treat its entire domestic audience as equally important to its economic sustainability. This 'universality' is upheld by the BBC's supporters, successive parliamentary committee inquiries and the Corporation itself as a central pillar of both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the licence fee for funding the BBC's public service operations.²⁹ Others, including the BBC's domestic competitors and independent production companies, have supported the TV licence fee for promoting a 'competition for quality' in UK broadcasting³⁰ (as opposed to direct competition for funding) and, rather than 'crowding out' commercial investment, described the licence fee as 'an enormous stimulus to the UK creative economy'.³¹

Beyond these two foundational benefits of public funding, however, we concur with the increasingly prominent criticisms that the TV licence fee is outdated, unfair and not an effective way to fund the BBC in the modern media landscape. As a 'flat tax', charged on the basis of anachronistic viewing habits, and irrespective of economic means, it is a regressive method for financing a universal public media institution. The TV licence fee enforcement regime is notoriously punitive,

disproportionately impacting the elderly, the disabled and the poorest households.³² The process for evaluating and setting the level of the licence fee is also dangerously exposed to political interference, with a now well established pattern of governments cutting and freezing the BBC's funding for political purposes. This means that it provides neither independence nor economic security. The former Chancellor George Osborne has given a damning insight into the connection between control of BBC funding and influence over the BBC's activities. In a recent interview he admitted that 'the government can basically boss the BBC around on its finances because the government sets the licence fee'.³³ The majority view of the authors of this paper is that funding the BBC via general taxation would similarly involve (and indeed formalise) the government holding direct control over the financial viability of an independent media organisation, and would be even more exposed to politicisation that puts the BBC's public services and the government's spending priorities in direct conflict. We are unanimous that, whatever the precise mechanism used, the level of public funding must be set in plain view, rather than through backroom negotiations.

However, the notion that the UK can abandon public funding for media altogether is the stuff of fantasy. The free play of market forces in the domestic market would reliably favour homogenous content produced by

unaccountable global producers with little regard to the democratic needs or cultural interests of UK audiences. It will not lead to the viewpoint diversity that the right claims to want, and will instead give even greater power and influence over our national conversation to billionaire-owned digital platforms and the UK's proudly partisan right-wing newspaper industry. The realities of contemporary media economics demonstrate that replacing the BBC's public funding with commercial models would be both ineffective and actively harmful to the UK's creative industries. The introduction of advertising, subscription or an increased mix of public and private funding would fatally undermine the BBC's core public service objectives, requiring it to produce a far greater amount of commercial content appealing to the largest or most profitable audiences, while reducing its investment in socially and culturally valuable (but commercially unappealing) genres and formats. Advertising would significantly interfere with the viewing experience of BBC content and diminish the BBC's universal relationship with its audiences. The duty to treat all audiences' needs and interests as equally important would necessarily be replaced by a need for the BBC to appeal to a commercial consumer base that would attract sufficient advertiser buy-in.

A move to full subscription or a 'top-up' system — in which premium BBC programmes and services would be separated, by means of

subscription or a paywall, from a significantly reduced core of free BBC content – would also incur harmful social costs. Large parts of the British public who could not afford the significantly higher costs of a subscription BBC,³⁴ or those most affected by the ‘digital divide’ and do not have reliable or affordable internet access,³⁵ would be excluded from accessing BBC content and benefitting from collective national use of its news, entertainment and cultural output.

A partially or wholly commercially funded BBC would also risk significant damage to the economic viability of the UK’s wider broadcasting and media system. Ampere Analysis suggests that the UK’s TV advertising sector could not support an additional major advertising buyer, nor could the pay-TV market support increased fragmentation in the subscription consumer base. In the case of advertising, Ampere notes that:

public funding would be required to ‘top up’ revenue to ensure that the BBC’s output was not impacted. Should such a top-up not occur, BBC output would be impaired, its viewing share would drop, and the revenue opportunity would decline further ... broadcasters reliant on advertising, including ITV, Channel 4, Five and Sky would be subject to negative unit pricing pressures – leading to onward negative effects on the wider UK TV distribution and production sector.³⁶

In 2023-24, £3.66bn or 68% of the BBC’s £5.39bn total income came from public funding via the TV licence fee, with the remainder generated by the BBC’s commercial operations. Although there is potential for the BBC to increase the commercial share of its total revenue (through e.g. further international distribution or providing overseas subscription services to core BBC content), this is unlikely to be a sustainable or feasible replacement for public funding. Intense global competition for generating and selling intellectual property (IP) in audiovisual content has put the BBC on uneven footing against the dominant streaming giants and international media studios, who are at once the BBC’s rivals and its biggest partners for distributing and monetising BBC content outside the UK. Furthermore, increasing the BBC’s reliance on commercial revenues would significantly undermine the public value of BBC output, as members of the public who contribute financially would lose their investment in new IP when this content is sold to commercial platforms and put behind paywalls. Such content is also likely to be less relevant or appealing to UK audiences, and would make the BBC’s output less distinctive if it became a central part of its income generation.

Mechanisms of accountability

Assumptions about public opinion and tastes are often deployed by BBC personnel as an alibi for editorial and commissioning decisions, particularly around in-depth treatment of topics.

‘The public aren’t interested in X’ becomes an irresistible *ex cathedra* pronouncement used to neglect matters of great importance, or to justify superficial treatment of issues. But core decision-makers at the BBC remain essentially unaccountable to their audiences, with editorial and commissioning decisions about newsworthiness taken in technocratic insulation from the public. This has been justified through appeals to professional expertise and independence. Indeed, the BBC explicitly defends the right of its editors to determine the news agenda. In response to a recent complaint about its Middle East coverage, the Executive Complaints Unit ruled that ‘decisions about which stories to select for inclusion in news bulletins are fundamentally matters for the judgment of editors and do not by themselves raise issues of editorial standards.’³⁷

These professional values, however, have not prevented the BBC from adopting populist themes and preoccupations, such as seconding their South Coast reporter as a national ‘small boats correspondent’ in the summer of 2024. Nor has the BBC effectively insulated itself from political pressure from governments or from well-funded pressure groups. The UK’s partisan press have often shaped the BBC’s news agenda.³⁸ Government appointees to the BBC’s board have always shaped BBC editorial policy, and have in some cases directly influenced programme making. Perhaps the best known cases of such editorial interference and influence

occurred during the 1980s, when a Conservative-aligned Board of Governors forced the resignation of the then Director General, Alasdair Milne. In recent years critics have pointed to the influence of Conservative-appointed BBC Chair Richard Sharp or – as already discussed – Robbie Gibb. Yet these are just the most discussed cases. Such political interference and pressure has been a feature of the BBC’s journalism throughout its history, often occurring behind the scenes,³⁹ and its board – in its various iterations – has in practice acted more as a body representing political interests in Westminster and Whitehall than licence fee payers.

Perhaps the most public-facing system of governance at the BBC was the BBC Trust, which replaced the Board of Governors under the 2007-2016 Royal Charter. The Trust served as ‘the guardian of the licence fee and the public interest’. It had an explicit duty to assess and represent the views of licence fee payers, and was advised by Audience Councils formed of members of the public in the four UK nations (discussed further below). Yet there was no explicit link between the views of Audience Councils and the decisions made by the Trust as the BBC’s sovereign body. Much of the Trust’s public work was overshadowed by its oversight of functions of the BBC Board and its high-profile handling of various BBC scandals throughout the Trust’s tenure.

Part of the reason the BBC has been so vulnerable to pressure from politicians is that, while it relies on broad public support for its legitimacy, it is governments that determine its main source of income, operations, and purposes. Decisions about the governance, purposes and output of the BBC have only ever been made at a great distance from the audiences the BBC is supposed to serve. Public policy debates about the BBC are consistently conducted in opaque ways that are separate from, and unaccountable to, the public. Apart from the Royal Charter's 'expiry date', there are no official mechanisms or legal requirements for how the government conducts BBC Charter renewal. This has meant that top-level political decisions about how the BBC should be organised, regulated and funded are products of state-craft rather than public consensus, and always shaped by the political priorities of the government of the day. The government's exclusive, unilateral control over the value of the licence fee has in recent years resulted in a decade of politically-motivated cuts and freezes, leaving the public with no say over the level of service their licence fee funds. Even George Osborne, the key figure in this project to shrink the BBC, has said he was 'somewhat shocked' by the ease with which it was accomplished. As noted above, Osborne explained in 2024 that 'you think of the BBC as being this big, independent organisation with lots of protection against the government ... but the chancellor can basically boss the BBC around on its finances

because the government sets the licence fee in the charter.'⁴⁰

The substance of Charter review is decided primarily through backroom deals and government bargaining – with the BBC always as the weaker party. Commercial lobbying has also had an increasing influence on debates about BBC policies, to the extent that government statements directly adopt the arguments, phrasing, and recommendations of the BBC's market competitors. Even with the relatively recent (since 2005) introduction of 'Green Paper' public consultations on Charter review, governments re-interpret and flatten the public's views to fit with their existing priorities for BBC reform. Public input is glossed over or actively disregarded, as demonstrated in 2015 when it was reported that many of the 190,000 public responses to the government's Charter review consultation might have been disregarded on the grounds that they had come from a 'left-wing' political organisation.⁴¹

Although the BBC has never been directly accountable to the public, for many years it operated a range of councils and committees to advise on and oversee its operations. These bodies held no executive powers and were not involved in commissioning or editorial decisions, but provided advice to the BBC on its broadcasting, particularly on controversial matters. They comprised a mix of BBC personnel and notable figures who notionally served as

representatives of the public. The number, form and remit of these bodies has varied over time, but this system of public consultation and expert advice was often very extensive. In 1968, for example, the total membership of these bodies was estimated at around 600 people.⁴²

The largest and most authoritative of these bodies was the General Advisory Council, the existence of which was once mandated by the BBC's Charter.⁴³ Membership of this Council consisted of 50 to 60 people drawn from a range of different social sectors, with the chair appointed by the Board of Governors.⁴⁴ It held four meetings every year, which were attended by the BBC Chair, the Director General and other senior BBC managers, and it discussed any and all aspects of BBC outputs and policy. In addition to advising the BBC on particular areas of its reporting, it could also commission reports on subjects it considered of interest or significance.⁴⁵

The General Advisory Council was no longer mandated in the 1997 Charter, but the BBC continued to maintain a range of other long-standing advisory councils, including national councils representing the constituent nations of the United Kingdom, as well as regional councils. The national councils, which later became the aforementioned Audience Councils, were explicitly tasked with engaging with, and representing, licence fee payers in their respective nations. While the chair was

appointed from the Board of Governors, and later the BBC Trust, members were selected from a shortlist drawn up by relevant selection panels. Positions on the councils were also advertised and anyone could apply to join.⁴⁶ These bodies met regularly to discuss how well the BBC was meeting its public purposes and serving its audiences, and they published summaries of these meetings.

England's Audience Council was supported by a network of Regional Audience Councils, which until 2007 reported to a body called the English National Forum. At that point the BBC maintained twelve such councils in England (London, the South East, the South, the South West, the East, the East Midlands, West Midlands, the West, Yorkshire, East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, the North East and the North West),⁴⁷ as well as twelve-person Local Advisory Councils for each BBC local radio station. Members of these local councils met regularly, served for up to three years, and were selected to ensure a proper representation of age, gender, background, occupation, interests, ethnic origin, disability and geographical location.

In addition to these advisory councils, some of which were mandated by the Charter and some of which were set up on the BBC's own initiative, the BBC has also convened a number of specialist councils, committees and consultative groups to advise it on particular aspects of its outputs, such as science, religion and education. These have

been populated by people of particular note in their fields, sometimes on the recommendation of other organisations or professional associations. They have included, for example, the Central Music Advisory Committee, the Central Religious Advisory Committee, the Consultative Group on Industrial and Business Affairs, the Further Education Advisory Council, the Rural and Agricultural Affairs Advisory Committee and the Science Consultative Group.⁴⁸

This considerable network of councils and committees once served an important function for the BBC by providing outside expertise, and helping to make the BBC more directly accountable than either market forces or audience research. As a former chair of the General Advisory Council once noted, unlike a research report, a council ‘could listen and speak back’.⁴⁹

However, the way the membership of these boards was selected was hardly democratic. The expert advisory groups were populated by prominent and socially and politically active figures within the relevant fields, and did not claim any form of democratic authority. Meanwhile the various bodies tasked with representing licence fee payers were in practice populated by ‘Establishment’ figures who critics noted served more as representatives of particular sectoral interests than of the public in general.⁵⁰ Mutualisation of the BBC presents us

with an opportunity to revive and renovate the apparatus of consultation, deliberation and dialogue at the BBC in ways that make it fit for a more egalitarian age. Expertise and specialist knowledge in the mutualised structure should not be ignored. Rather they should contribute to a more widely publicised, and more consequential, engagement with the public.

Technological change

The BBC has recently been forced to confront new challenges from revolutionary technological changes in media and communications. Crucially, social media platforms have emerged as the pre-eminent curators and distributors of news content and cultural commentary. At the same time the BBC has failed to transform its own, considerable, online presence into a platform organised around public service values. As a result the BBC’s independent ability to reach audiences, especially young audiences, has been greatly reduced. The challenges posed by this new digital media environment extend beyond news and current affairs as conventionally defined. Acculturation, including political acculturation, increasingly takes place online through podcasting, streaming and gaming. If the BBC is to contribute to our frames of reference when we create our worldviews, it will have to become a significant player in these new genres and in the interactive digital media through which they are organised and delivered to large audiences.⁵¹ And while competing with

the private platforms it will have to find ways to promote online and offline sociability, the reasoned exchange of views, and a high quality of collective deliberation. Indeed it will have to prioritise these pro-social qualities over the private platforms' drive for raw engagement, which is often hard to distinguish from the encouragement of addiction.

The BBC's managers are alive to some of these issues. In a 2024 speech the Director General Tim Davie explained that the corporation was developing 'public service algorithms and AI':

As we move to an internet-only world, we can shape this tipping point to act for the benefit of the British public. We can choose not to rely solely on US and Chinese tech companies who may not have the interests of a shared British culture and our democratic, tolerant society at their heart. This will require us to create unique algorithms to serve our values, for good. Algorithms and AI that bring us closer, not drive us apart. Personalisation, of course, but not driven by a narrow commercial return.⁵²

But we are confronted again by the problem of accountability. Software engineers, like news and current affairs editors, may have a worldview that reflects their own interests, and which leads to serious biases and oversights. This is a consistent feature of the BBC's coverage, after all. In the years before the 2007-8 financial crisis, for example, the BBC showed little interest

in, and less scepticism about, the UK's dependence on credit expansion to generate economic growth. After the crisis they failed to subject the government's claims about the need for fiscal austerity to sustained challenge. If the new public service algorithms and 'AI' assets are informed by unsafe assumptions about the nature of the social world they will continue to generate justified hostility and scepticism in the minds of those who pay for them. This danger is to some extent baked into the BBC's current management culture. Davie explained in the same speech that, when designing algorithms and 'AI', he wanted 'to keep other factors in play like serendipity (think the average Radio 4 day); curiosity; and an interest in what our BBC editors may judge to be important stories.'⁵³ While the customer is far from always right, in this instance they would be right to be extremely wary of digital aids created in conditions of commercial confidentiality by socially unusual experts. The great advantage of public service digital development is that its operating assumptions can be made transparent, and then put to rigorous test by the users that will rely on them. What editors and other experts think is important and should feed into these operating assumptions. But they should not do so without checks and balances that derive from elsewhere, including crucially, the public.⁵⁴

The problem of misinformation

After the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 it became commonplace

in academic studies to speak of an ‘epistemic crisis’ brought about by the proliferation of reckless, or straightforwardly deceitful, actors on the various digital platforms. In the background was the idea that after the Second World War the broadcast-print media system had helped ensure that ‘democracy operated within constraints with regard to a shared set of institutional statements about reality.’⁵⁵ While there is no need for nostalgia, it is certainly true that ‘[s]ome shared means of defining what facts or beliefs are off the wall and what are plausibly open to reasoned debate is necessary to maintain a democracy.’⁵⁶

There is growing disquiet at the growth of online misinformation and disinformation. No doubt some at the BBC will seek to position it as the solution to this problem of unregulated information distribution. We share that ambition. But it is important to recognise the positive potential in participatory digital media, as well as the dangers. The digital platforms have allowed outright misinformation to reach large audiences. But they have also made it possible for reasoned and important critiques, including critiques of the BBC and the rest of the media-political establishment, to gain a much greater salience. It is not at all certain that the *Guardian’s* 2011 reporting on criminal behaviour by other newspapers would have had the impact it did without the amplifying assistance provided by the users of Twitter, Facebook and other platforms. Digital

technology played an important role in coordinating the popular uprisings in the Middle East that began in Tunisia in 2010-11. And the #metoo and #blm movements both depended on social media as much as the conventional media to reach large audiences. Whatever form a digital BBC takes it must not become part of an attempt to restore print-broadcast’s structure of silence and speech. It is important that the quality of information online is subject to rigorous test. But this work is too important to leave to a handful of regulators and senior managers. The task belongs to us all and it is up to us all to establish an institutional structure, and a division of labour, in which we can do it well.

Civic media has to be more engaging than the conspiratorial and sensational content generated by private algorithms. This will only be possible if it engages effectively with the lived experience of its audiences and with the political avenues through which change can be affected. If we can’t understand what is happening to the place where we live, or do anything about it, we will instead be drawn to paranoid infotainment, or repelled altogether from attempting to understand the world. No amount of ‘fact-checking’ or ‘myth-busting’ will be enough to reduce the demand for extreme, and therefore compelling, content. Only a fully realised public alternative, capable of challenging unfounded sensation and deceit of all kinds, will suffice.

As it stands the digital turn constitutes a significant, potentially terminal, threat to the BBC. According to its 2024 annual report half a million fewer households bought a TV licence than in the previous year, and less than half of the British public now watch BBC television news in a given week.⁵⁷ The BBC's predicament in news production is mirrored in its arts and entertainment programming. Global streaming makes possible economies of scale that pose a significant challenge to a merely national media organisation. The rapid growth in international production has also flattened the variety and depth of cultural expression. Audiovisual 'content' is increasingly homogenised and pitched for an international (predominantly North American) audience. There is little commercial incentive for local, niche and 'market gap' content. How can a national broadcaster more effectively represent and accurately reflect the stories, identities and communities of a diverse multi-national community? Here, too, the reforms we propose would reinvigorate public media. For now it is enough to note that the post-Thatcherite reforms of the BBC, in particular the contracting out of

core activities to a nominally independent sector, have not created a network of privately owned producers that are able to compete consistently in global markets. Rather, it has left the BBC with a new set of public-private patronage relationships every bit as opaque and unaccountable as the in-house arrangements they replaced.

A structural dependence on government and a deference to elite assumptions about the superiority of market forces over public service values together help explain the BBC's inability to adapt quickly and effectively to the post-broadcast media environment. Successive governments discouraged the BBC from taking its place in the front rank of digital providers. Meanwhile generations of senior managers were content to preside over a steadily shrinking broadcast space. This combination of active discouragement and passive acceptance has not cleared the way for a dynamic private digital media sector in the United Kingdom, but to an increasing dependence on foreign owned and controlled platforms and assets, and an increasing vulnerability to disinformation.

2. The Mutual Option

In this second section we explain how mutual principles can help address the challenges faced by the BBC. We discuss how these principles might best be applied in a large, publicly funded, media institution. This sets the stage for the third and final section in which we provide an outline of the possible institutional structures that can embody these principles, and explain the difference that mutualisation will make – not only to the BBC, but to the country as a whole.

Charter renewal in 2027-8

It is against this background of longstanding concerns about the impartiality of the BBC, and more recent changes in the structure of media and communications, that the Labour government begins its preparations to review and renew the BBC's Royal Charter. The timing is auspicious. It was in 1927 that Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government reconstituted the British Broadcasting Company as a chartered corporation, and the BBC took on its current form as a public service organisation with a preeminent place in the broadcasting sector and in British culture more broadly. There will be extensive public debate about the terms of the Charter renewal and the future of the BBC over the next two years as the BBC approaches its centenary year as a public body. The debate is

likely to be of interest far beyond the United Kingdom, since if the BBC cannot adapt to the new media environment, it is unlikely any public service media will. That would mean in future the preponderance of the world's media would belong to a handful of nominally private sector operations based either in the United States or China.

The Mutual Approach as a Solution

Over the years many influential figures in the UK have argued for mutualisation, which is to say for a BBC that is owned by licence fee payers. In 2010 Tessa Jowell and David Miliband wrote in support of mutualisation in an article for *Progress*. They tied the funding model to the case for greater accountability to the public: 'Owned by the British public and paid for directly through each household's TV licence, it is only right that ordinary members of the public should have a real say in how it is run.'⁵⁸ Miliband supported BBC mutualisation in his leadership campaign that year. Jowell, who had previously served as the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, went on to argue in 2013 that '[i]t is the public and the licence fee payers who should be in the driving seat. So the argument would be the BBC should indeed be owned by its licence fee payers. The BBC should become the country's biggest mutual.' This, Jowell said, would help address 'public concern about

government involvement threatening the independence of the BBC.⁵⁹ The principle that the BBC should be the shared possession of the public who fund it has informed the centre left's approach to the corporation for more than a decade.

The current Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy, picked up this theme in the 2020 Labour leadership election, saying, 'I'd like to see us mutualise the BBC so that those decisions are taken by a wider group of people.' She was explicit that mutualisation was not to be merely symbolic, but should have significant consequences for the distribution of decision-making: 'I'd like to see us not just move the headquarters of Channel 4 and the BBC out of London but commissioning power too, so what gets made and what gets said is not determined by a small group of men behind a desk in Westminster and Whitehall.'⁶⁰ If the BBC after 2027 is to be funded through a system of compulsory payment, whether through a licence, levy or general taxation, then widening participation in governance, funding and commissioning decisions becomes a democratic necessity. If no one can opt out of funding the BBC then no one should be excluded from being able to play a direct and active role in its operations.

Faced with the twin challenges of declining trust and rapid technological change, mutualisation of the BBC is an attractive option. Those who worry

about the BBC's tendency to adopt and amplify perspectives and themes from elsewhere in the UK establishment can reasonably expect a member-led BBC to be more resistant to 'elite capture'. Those who believe the BBC is too deferential to the financial sector, and too easily intimidated by the government of the day, should want to enhance the independence and diversity of the organisation by giving it a much more decisively public character. Those who take the view that the BBC exhibits a liberal, metropolitan bias out of step with the values of its audiences should also want to see these same audiences afforded greater power to shape its output. In any case, a BBC genuinely owned and governed by its viewers and listeners will be better able to resist manipulation by elites, however they are construed.

There are also good reasons to believe that a mutualised BBC will be better able to adapt to a media environment characterised by global digital distribution and large social media platforms. Platforms live or die on their ability to attract users at scale and generate network effects. A universal national platform owned and governed by its users for defined public purposes would have an appeal and a level of user engagement that even more highly resourced profit-led corporate platforms cannot hope to match. Moreover, the absence of the profit motive means that the BBC, as a public service platform, is not motivated to capture collectively created value and deliver it to external

shareholders.⁶¹ Time and ingenuity expended by the membership online could rather be fed back into the steady refinement mutually created, and generally accessible, knowledge and analysis.

To date there has been little detailed discussion of what it would mean to mutualise a large public service media operation in a period of rapid technological change, a climate emergency and increased geopolitical instability. There is a risk that proposals for mutualisation remain vague, ill-defined and seemingly impractical. There is also a danger that the model of mutualisation adopted will fall short and fail to address the, potentially fatal, challenges the BBC faces. In what follows we provide an introduction to the mutual ownership model, including some contemporary examples and historical context, before setting out what a meaningful mutualisation of the organisation would entail in general terms. We then turn to the more concrete institutional implications in the final section.

What is a mutual organisation?

The term ‘mutual’ is used to describe a number of different ownership models. While there is a specifically mutual legal form, the industrial and provident society, mutuals can also be organised as partnerships or limited companies. For example, employee-owned enterprises are a form of mutual that often operate as limited companies whose shares are owned directly by employees, or on their behalf by a trust. But all

mutuals provide, or aspire to provide, empowered participation to their members. As an official 2011 report by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills puts it:

The distinguishing characteristic of a mutual is that the organisation is owned by, and run for, the benefit of its members, who are *actively* and *directly* involved in the business – whether its employees, suppliers, or the community or consumers it serves, rather than being owned and controlled by outside investors.⁶²

In the United Kingdom there is a long history of mutual organisation in finance, especially mortgage lending (‘building societies’), where the largest surviving exemplar by far is Nationwide, and in the retail sector (‘The Coop’). The latter is an important element in the overall cooperative movement, which was created out of a desire to challenge the abuse of market power by large capitalist enterprises. In 1844 the Rochdale Pioneers’ Cooperative Society had announced its founders’ ambition ‘to arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government ... to create a self-supporting colony of united interests, or assist other societies in establishing such colonies.’⁶³ Over time the cooperative movement evolved into something more like ‘a consumers’ organisation for the supply of unadulterated goods at fair prices ... and for the safe investment of savings.’⁶⁴ As such it took its place alongside trade unions and the Labour Party as a key

institutional element of the labour movement's attempt at cultural, as well as economic, transformation in the UK in the period before the Second World War.

Worker cooperatives remained part of this industrial tradition, albeit on a smaller scale. For example, in the period immediately after the First World War, cooperatively organised 'building guilds' were able to build housing more quickly and efficiently than their capitalist competitors. These guilds contracted with public authorities to produce houses at cost, and any surplus was returned at the end of the contracts. It was a model for what we might call 'public service house-building', the successes of which astonished contemporary economists, but which has been almost entirely forgotten.⁶⁵ Recent debates about public sector reform, including reform of public service broadcasting, have usually taken place without any reference to this history of guild socialism in the UK.

Today many of the surviving mutuals are consumer coops, which in theory are owned by, and operated on behalf of, their customers. There are also examples of this form of cooperative organisation in the media sector. The *Morning Star* newspaper in the UK has been governed by its readers through the People's Press Printing Society since 1945.⁶⁶ The *Bristol Cable* grants its 2600 member-subscribers voting power for electing its directors.

There are also examples of so-called 'hybrid' media cooperatives, which bring both consumers and workers into the spheres of beneficial ownership and strategic control. The *New Internationalist* in the UK and *Die Tageszeitung* in Germany have this hybrid structure.⁶⁷ We should also note that there are forms of municipal cooperativism that seek to establish active and direct involvement of communities in the management of publicly owned assets.⁶⁸ The successes of this cooperative ecosystem are all the more remarkable given that it has lacked an anchor institution, in the form of a publicly funded body tasked with enacting cooperative principles internally and promoting them externally.

The powers enjoyed by members of media cooperatives can play an important role in building resilience and collective capacity. *Mutual Interest Media* was a multi-stakeholder media cooperative active between 2021 and 2023.⁶⁹ Each month it put 45% of its revenues into a reader-controlled fund. Members then allocated their equal share of this fund to writers whose work they appreciated. As Iwan Doherty, *Mutual Interest's* co-editor, notes, this active and direct involvement in decisions about the distribution of resources helped foster a strong sense of shared ownership.⁷⁰ And membership structures can also have a beneficial impact on the journalism of media mutuals. The *Bristol Cable's* Strategy Lead from 2023 to 2025, Eliz Mizon, explains that its mutual ownership model

‘encourages engagement holistically, not just financially and in governance, but crucially in participation in the journalistic process. Members contribute ideas, experiences and tip offs to the staff team which allow for a better reflection of the members’ experiences, needs and lives.’ Mizon is in no doubt that the success of the *Cable* as an independent local news operation is tied directly to its structure: ‘a mutual structure can build significant trust and public support where many other media organisations have failed.’⁷¹

Alongside the mutual and cooperative tradition we should also consider recent innovations and revivals in democratic theory and practice. It has long been acknowledged that elections alone do not guarantee effective democracy: structured participation in civic life, safeguarded by a regime of rights, is also required. From the early nineties, and especially since the global financial crisis, there have been numerous experiments in political deliberation by more or less randomly selected ‘mini-publics’, many of which have been conspicuously successful. As we theorise civic mutualism – the active and direct involvement of the citizenry in the management of public bodies – we have rich traditions of republican, socialist and democratic thought from which to draw.⁷²

The Public Purposes of the BBC

Before we consider in more detail this repertoire of institutional forms, we have to establish what ‘active’ and ‘direct’ involvement would look like

in the case of the BBC. This in turn requires us to be clear about what the business of the BBC is. And this is not as simple as it might seem. The BBC’s Royal Charter sets out the ‘public purposes’ of the BBC, which are the missions and public benefits the BBC is required to promote across all of its output. The five current ‘public purposes’ in place under the 2017-2028 Charter are (1) to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them; (2) to support learning for people of all ages; (3) to show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services; (4) to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom; (5) to reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.⁷³

The 2007-2016 Charter was different in subtle but significant ways. It set out six public purposes: (1) sustaining citizenship and civil society; (2) promoting education and learning; (3) stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; (4) representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities; (5) bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK; (6) in promoting its other purposes, helping to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services and, in addition, taking a leading role in the switchover to digital television.⁷⁴ It is striking

that the first of the 2007 public purposes, ‘sustaining citizenship and civil society’, disappeared from the 2017 version without much in the way of comment at the time. The ease with which the government of the day can change these public purposes gives us some idea of how little they feature in the public debates that the BBC does so much to shape. Consider how many people in the UK know that the BBC *has* public purposes, let alone how many know that they change every ten years. Similarly, as recently as 2016, the BBC was tasked with taking a leading role in ‘emerging communications technologies’. It is deeply unfortunate that it was demoted from a primary public purpose to one of several ‘general duties’ at the precise moment when the mass uptake of digital platforms was taking place in earnest.

The public purposes are a relatively new invention in the constitution of the BBC, having only been introduced in the 2007-2016 Royal Charter. The Royal Charter has always included top-level commitments ‘to inform, educate and entertain’ - providing high quality news and current affairs content in support of civic engagement, to lifelong education, and to cultural production, broadly defined. Yet the way that the public purposes can be changed to redirect the BBC’s overall mission demonstrates their central importance for public media in the UK, as well as the significance of the government’s ability to rewrite them as part of Charter review. The exact content of the BBC’s

new public purposes will be determined by the government’s Charter review process from now until the end of 2027. It is vital that in that crucial period the public have ample opportunity to reflect on these purposes, to assess the BBC’s successes and failures in delivering them, and participate democratically in the process by which the new purposes will be decided. For now we can say with some confidence that the particular business of the BBC, into which the public would be incorporated through substantive mutualisation, has been to assemble and maintain an interlocking structure of informational resources: news and current affairs production that provides citizens with reliable, pertinent descriptions and analyses, on the basis of which the public can make both political and private decisions; cultural production in which audiences can see themselves and others depicted, and that provides us with a shared stock of referents and exemplars; and educational production that facilitates knowledge and skills transfer, and that assists in the co-production of wholly new, properly speaking unpredictable, structures of thought. Taken together these informational resources aid in connecting the peoples of the United Kingdom. Given the contemporary importance of digital technology, which is difficult to overstate, we would furthermore strongly argue for the development of communications technologies to be reinstated as core to the BBC’s purpose.

We can assume that the public purposes of the BBC will continue to be influenced by these long established notions of information, education and entertainment, as well by its responsibilities to represent, reflect and connect the diverse communities and identities of the United Kingdom.⁷⁵ In what follows we work on the understanding that any future BBC will retain its missions to *inform, educate, entertain* along with a new foundational purpose to *connect*. And regardless of the exact form they take in the future, the existing public purposes make it clear that the BBC has not been in its first century a commercial enterprise. Rather it has been, and presumably will remain, an organisation crucial to the civic life of the United Kingdom. It is a central feature of the country's uncodified constitution. Civil society relies on the BBC to mediate between it and the public; and most of the public still turn to the BBC for knowledge about the world beyond their direct experience. BBC audiences are not only media consumers, they are also the citizens of a democracy, in which the BBC plays a central role.

Mutualisation of the BBC requires that its members – the public who fund it, as well as its staff – are involved actively and directly in delivering the public purposes of the BBC. That is, individuals and groups of members must be directly involved in the processes through which we are all informed, educated, and entertained. The promise of mutualisation is nothing less than the activation of the vast reserves of latent

knowledge, intelligence and expertise in society at large. Capitalist social media platforms already allow us to inform, educate and entertain one another, albeit in the shadow of arbitrary interference by unaccountable owners, moderators and engineers. We are in a position to create a public digital media infrastructure that enables us all to guide the operations of professional and technical staff, and to communicate with one another in ways that are themselves constitutive of the BBC's publicly defined, and publicly interpreted, purposes. The BBC can become a space in which we discover our priorities and preferences, and act upon them. We face a choice between building an organisation that can facilitate the conscious deliberation of a democratically articulated public, or remaining at the mercy of billionaire owners, the logic of market forces, and the demands of political oligarchy.

It follows from this that the ordinary forms of mutualisation found in the commercial sector, which are organised along essentially consumerist lines, will not provide us with an adequate model. It is not only that the diversity of the BBC's public purposes requires a more diverse institutional structure. (For example, mechanisms that successfully promote active and direct public involvement in news and current affairs production may be less useful in the case of music, drama or comedy commissioning.) The BBC's core business means that effective mutualisation must establish the

active and direct participation by members in its operations as producers of knowledge, analysis, and judgement.

Against Hollow Mutualism

Cooperative principles and practices have a great deal to contribute to the institutional design of the post-2027 BBC. The principles of equal and open membership and members' control of economic resources must be core to any public service mutual. Mutualisation also provides the BBC with an opportunity to step away from benchmarking with the commercial sector and to align itself with a community of new and established mutuals driven by an ethic of service to their members. As a result, we expect that a BBC based on universal membership will be much better at maintaining sensible levels of wage inequality than is currently the case. We would also expect that a mutualised BBC will be at least as adept at partnering with other cooperatives and mutuals as the current BBC is at partnering with corporates. Indeed, there is a much greater affinity between mutuals and public service organisations than between public service organisations and private companies. With adequate oversight by members the potential to generate benefits to the public is considerable. That said, it is also vital that individual members in a reformed BBC directly experience the difference that mutualisation makes. BBC members will not receive an individual share in the proceeds of trade, as in a commercial mutual. The benefits of membership

will have to take other forms. Crucially, membership will have to confer power over the distribution of resources, and over the processes of collective sense-making, that are at the core of the BBC's purposes. The dividend will be a better informed, and better connected, citizenry.

A mutualised BBC will inevitably be different from the conventional commercial model in one other very important respect. The most recent version of the Rochdale Principles describes cooperatives as 'voluntary organisations.'⁷⁶ While as BBC members we will not be obliged to make use of our rights to engage actively and directly in its operations, since the BBC will remain a public sector institution we will not be able to opt out of funding them. As discussed in Section One, the case for a publicly funded, and publicly accountable, institution at the heart of our communications system is very clear. But mutualisation of the BBC cannot be a ruse for creating a so-called 'shareholder democracy', or provide cover for turning the BBC into an opt-in or subscription service. So we should be explicit that the BBC will be a new kind of institution, in which mutualism's core values of active and direct involvement are embedded in the public sector.

We can take comfort from the original ambition of the Rochdale cooperators to 'arrange the powers' of government, as well as education, production and distribution. Later guild socialists did not hesitate to speak in terms of a

‘cooperative commonwealth’, which would encompass the state as well as much of the economy. In 1944, for example, Canada’s Federation for a Cooperative Commonwealth committed itself to replace capitalism with ‘a social order in which economic planning will supersede private enterprise and in which genuine democratic self-government based on economic equality will be possible.’⁷⁷ As a publicly funded body in which all citizens are empowered to participate, a mutualised BBC will serve as a laboratory for civic cooperation, and a partner institution for the wider cooperative movement. It might, if the members wish, form part of a cooperative commonwealth. But it cannot escape the compulsion inherent in government.

There are practical reasons to be cautious of simply transplanting the institutional structures of well-known commercial mutuals into the operations of a large public service media organisation. Both the Nationwide and the Cooperative, for example, depend on voting at an Annual General Meeting (AGM) to secure for their members their share of ‘active’ and ‘direct’ involvement in their respective businesses. Ballots open to all qualifying members are used on up-down resolutions and to approve board membership. In theory these votes are highly consequential. But the turnout of ordinary members tends to be very low, and the resolutions of management usually pass with overwhelming majorities. For example, at the

2024 Nationwide AGM fewer than 4% of members voted on any resolution and all the resolutions passed with more than 90% of the votes cast.⁷⁸ If anything the example of the Cooperative Group is even less encouraging. In 2009 the structures intended to ensure the active and direct involvement of members were unable to stop a merger with the Britannia building society that left the group as a whole dangerously exposed. In the aftermath, much of the Cooperative’s asset base was sold off and a consortium of hedge funds acquired a controlling interest in the Cooperative Bank.⁷⁹

The origins of the Coop debacle are to be found in what we might call ‘hollow mutualism’, a governance structure which can be dominated by coalitions of interested insiders against a background of widespread rational ignorance on the part of the wider membership. It takes considerable effort to understand the various business activities of building societies and consumer cooperatives. A structure of governance based on votes on resolutions and board appointments provides individual members with no independent means to communicate with one another, no opportunities to explore options or to develop policy collectively, and little realistic prospect of building successful coalitions. The situation for employees, and for a minority of ideologically engaged and politically connected members, is very different. For them the decisions made at AGMs can be hugely consequential and so there

is a strong incentive for them to organise and engage. It is not surprising that the great majority decline to make use of their voting powers in such circumstances. And it is reasonable to believe that the minority who do vote tend to take their cues from well-placed insiders aligned with the management.⁸⁰

This is not an organisational model that we think should be followed in the case of the BBC. A nominally mutual structure in which most members have little information, and even less scope to act on it, would do little to address problems with the BBC's current model. After all, the BBC already has something in common with mutuals, in that it is not owned and controlled by outside investors. Furthermore, as successive Charters have made clear, the BBC is run for the benefit of the public. The principle that the BBC serves the public is captured by the very term 'public service broadcasting'. The implication that the BBC is a public possession is sometimes reflected in the BBC's own pronouncements. For example, in preparations for Charter renewal in 2015 the then-Director General, Tony Hall, claimed that 'the BBC belongs to the public.'⁸¹ This is not true in any legal, or indeed practical, sense. The current BBC is not a public possession but a corporation established by Royal Charter and constituted by the members of its board. But Tony Hall's rhetoric captures something of the ethos of mutuality that the BBC has sometimes sought to invoke.

Articulating Public Involvement in the BBC

The public purposes of the BBC might be more likely to engage members than the commercial concerns of the Nationwide or the Cooperative group. But it would still be a mistake to rely on occasional votes by members to secure their active and direct involvement. Even if there is more engagement in votes on resolutions, it is likely to come at a cost. Decisions of members might very well reflect existing patterns of controversy and contention, when it is precisely these patterns of controversy, and the institutions and interests that generate them, that the empowered membership of a fully mutualised BBC would want to challenge, and where necessary, reject. We could also expect well funded public relations operations to seek the support of BBC members for divisive motions on emotive and divisive issues when what is needed is careful and critical deliberation. Mutualisation that does not take seriously the threat from deceptive and bad faith actors is almost bound to fail.⁸²

Rather than encouraging *active* and *direct* involvement in the ongoing task of 'sustaining citizenship and civil society', a constitutional structure simply cribbed from the large commercial mutuals risks corraling the BBC's members into partisan cliques when they are asked to vote on appointments. Political parties would no doubt organise in such a structure to contest elections for board positions at the BBC.

They can hardly be expected to abstain when they exist to capture as many elected offices as possible. The election of a ‘viewer’s representative’ to the BBC’s board falls so far short of active and direct involvement that it seems the main reason this has been raised in recent press coverage of potential BBC reform has been to raise the spectre of an electoral contest between Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn.

Nor does the direct election of technical and professional staff in a media operation recommend itself. Few of us know who would make a good head of news and current affairs, or a commissioner of drama programming. Almost nobody outside of the BBC knows much about its operational structure. Partisan competition to control key positions will do little to inform us about the merits of the various candidates. To the extent that we engage, we will do so on the basis of cues that have little to do with the challenges of running a large media organisation, let alone doing so in such a way as to enhance the powers of the citizens of democracy. Instead we will be directed this way and that by the presentational strategies of organised and well resourced competitors for power and status.

A mutualised system of governance would have to be fully integrated into the operations of the BBC as an investigative-analytical and creative institution, in such a way as to radically improve

operations across all dimensions of its mission, including, perhaps crucially, that of deliberation in support of citizenship and civil society. Mutualisation stands or falls on its ability to outperform the freely available and subscription-based commercial alternatives. If mutualisation fails to establish a robust culture of popular engagement and contestation, the combination of continued submissiveness to the broader elite common sense, even if laundered through elections, and rapid changes in the media environment, are likely to prove catastrophic for the BBC. Elections might have a place in a mutualised BBC, but without a range of other institutional interventions they will be inadequate, if not actively harmful.⁸³

To be clear, the concern here is not that a hollow mutual structure might ‘politicise’ the BBC. The BBC is, and must inevitably be, politicised. It is, after Parliament, the most important political institution in the country and is already politicised by virtue of its direct relationship with government. The concern is rather that an inadequately mutualised BBC will become a space in which themes and controversies nurtured elsewhere, usually by those with great wealth and power, will play themselves out in elections and resolutions in which the stakes are obscure, and the criteria for popular judgement are unclear. Given all this, it is best to see mutualisation as an opportunity to create a partnership between the creators and organisers of content on the one hand, and the audiences

they serve on the other. Rather than porting over the institutions of the Coop or Nationwide, the aim must be to improve the conduct of the BBC through the *direct* and *active* involvement of its audiences in its operations, through an ongoing dialogue with its staff, in a reformed distribution of knowledge and power. The BBC itself must be structured in ways that improve the quality of public deliberation, including on issues where those with powerful interests are eager to preserve their influence.

The BBC caters to audiences that currently have little insight into its workings, or the problems it is trying to solve. This lack of understanding is compounded by a more general confusion about the structures of social reality, for which the BBC must take its share of the blame. For while the BBC spends many billions over the course of each Charter in a no doubt well-intentioned effort to inform its audiences, much of the public remain misinformed on key issues. Recent polling suggests that the majority of the British electorate, and therefore the majority of the BBC's domestic audience, do not know how tax bands work, or how many millions there are in billion. Only 16% of those asked know roughly how large the UK state's budget is. Meanwhile, 22% think that MPs' expenses are in the top three of things the state spends money on.⁸⁴ This only confirms what previous surveys have shown: the recent waves of carelessly shared misinformation and deliberately crafted

disinformation have washed over a population already only haphazardly informed.

The evidence suggests that elites are sometimes at least as poorly informed as the public over which they preside. Professional politicians appear to have a very poor understanding of what the voters think. A 2018 paper concluded that '[on] a broad set of controversial issues in contemporary American politics, US state political elites in 2012 and 2014 believed that much more of the public in their constituencies preferred conservative policies than actually did.'⁸⁵ A survey conducted in Canada, Germany, Flanders and Wallonia similarly reported that 'politicians are quite inaccurate estimators of people's preferences. They make large errors and even regularly misperceive what a majority of voters wants.'⁸⁶ Even those who enjoy easy access to the BBC's reporting are not immune. A 2017 survey found that 85% of British legislators did not understand that banks create new money when they extend credit to their customers.⁸⁷

The fact that the public and their elected representatives are not well informed about some matters of fact might not even be the most important problem with the current systems of information and communication. The media, including public media, are often very bad at setting out and evaluating competing causal accounts in many contested areas of our shared life. In 2008 a Rowntree report concluded that 'structural accounts of the origin and

distribution of poverty are especially lacking' in media coverage of the issue.⁸⁸ This reluctance to engage in questions of social structure can be found in other areas of public interest and seems quite pronounced at the BBC. John Christensen, who headed the Tax Justice Network for many years, worked on 'four Panorama programmes commissioned by the BBC in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis' and describes how:

Initial plans to focus on macro systemic issues morphed during production and post-production into a focus on micro topics, including the tax affairs of prominent individuals. In all four instances I withdrew from my advisory role because I felt, and still feel, that the BBC was running scared of treading on the toes of powerful players in government and the City of London.⁸⁹

Substantive Mutualism in the Context of the BBC

The BBC has an extremely complex mission and operates across a range of distinct domains. Its operations are at once highly technical and of great public significance. Institutional forms that might improve news and current affairs production might be actively harmful in the context of education, drama or entertainment. Its mission to educate also presents a distinct set of challenges. The recent changes to the technology of media and communications have further complicated these challenges.

The Members as Commissioners

Substantive mutualism requires that the audience is empowered to engage directly and actively in shaping public speech. To that end we propose that individual members of the BBC – which is to say the UK public – have a right to allocate some, non-trivial, fraction of the BBC's income to journalistic, cultural and educational projects they wish to support. Funding rounds should take place regularly and the aggregate results should be published by the BBC. At present rich editors and corporate managers, and very rich media owner-operators, dominate decisions about the distribution of material resources in the media system. Under their direction and control this system leaves people very poorly informed about matters of great public interest, while it is notably silent on, or misleading about, issues that affect the vital interests of the rich and powerful. Under this system of essentially plutocratic control British society has become markedly more unequal. A media system in which the majority are empowered to make important commissioning decisions will create a more level playing field for public deliberation.⁹⁰

Institutions and individuals that solicit support from BBC members would need to meet certain, more or less stringent, requirements. We recommend that all individuals and organisations are subject to mandatory reporting requirements, making project expenditure transparent for all members, and

furthermore that all digital content supported by such funding is made freely available and published without commercial copyright restrictions. We also recommend that receipt of such funding requires a commitment to union recognition and, in the case of media organisations, the acceptance of genuinely independent regulation. There is also an argument for making the receipt of public subsidies conditional on the organisations involved also adopting a mutual structure. This would have the advantage of providing seed funding for an expansion of the mutual sector. As it stands, start-ups are dependent on venture capital funding and therefore are forced to adopt a capitalist institutional form, and the end goal is often for the owners of innovative companies to sell out to the dominant commercial players. We would all stand to benefit if this approach to company formation and innovation faced competition from a public alternative.

It might be argued that the rich will still be able to mobilise vastly greater resources than even the many millions of members of a substantively mutualised BBC. But money does not translate pound-for-pound into communicative power. Democratic media can degrade oligarchic propaganda to the extent that it is adequately resourced, reaches large audiences, and targets real inaccuracies and irrationalities. No doubt the oligarchic media will return the favour from time to time when democratic media err. All moderate pluralists and liberal enthusiasts for a

robust marketplace of ideas should welcome this. But in the current media environment it is the very rich who enjoy free rein, not the rest of us. And it is the rest of us who have the most to gain from careful interrogation of the claims propagated by the privately owned and profit-driven media.

This redistribution of commissioning power to the general public is bound to prompt a range of objections from at least some professional journalists and managers, and certainly from the billionaires they work for. And some members of the public will have good faith concerns about what would constitute a major change in the way the media are incentivised. This is not the place to try to preempt all possible responses to this proposal. But it is worth addressing some of them. Perhaps a 'national crowdfunder' will have perverse or even dangerous consequences: the public may unthinkingly lend their support to malicious actors, who will further pollute the discourse with disinformation and conspiracy-tainment. There is no point denying the risks. Innovation in something so profoundly consequential as this cannot be risk-free. Perhaps some people will hand funds to operations that are less than ideal or even pernicious. But we have good reason to think that the benefits will far outweigh the disadvantages. Popular distrust in the BBC and other major media is growing because people feel that certain kinds of inquiry and analysis are being unfairly suppressed, and in ways that

harm those of us outside the circle of elite decision-making. In some respects this feeling might be misplaced. But in some respects it is entirely justified. We have already noted that the media, including public media, struggle to engage in a serious way with structural accounts of social reality. This bias against structure creates a space for social media entrepreneurs and hired publicists to fill with fantasies about our shared world. The solution is not hand-wringing about public credulity but building a media system that will produce more, and better, explanations. General commissioning powers will give us all broadly accessible means to test various suspicions and anxieties in light of the evidence.

Others might object that, while giving the public the means to fund journalistic, educational and cultural projects is not dangerous, this ‘national crowdfunder’ would be pointless: the public will give their money to forms of media that are already lavishly funded, or simply ignore the opportunity to participate. But while this might seem plausible at first, trading as it does on a very widely accepted story of public apathy and frivolity, it is not, in our view, a fatal objection. After all, many people already give funds to help support media operations whose work is then made generally available. Our proposal broadens the opportunity to do so, while massively reducing transaction costs. More fundamentally, it removes financial barriers to, and increases the effects of, participation: taken together our

individual decisions about what to fund become a moving picture of what we collectively value, what we want to know, how we want to make sense of our lives. Systematic knowledge of what we want to know more about, and systematic knowledge of what others want us to know more about, are almost completely elusive, and are now the exclusive possession of large technology companies and their partners in the state. When they do become available, as in the #metoo and #blm breakthroughs on social media, the impact on our worldviews can be profound. The significance of the powers proposed, and the benefits of using them, might well escape us now, when we do not have them, and do not know what we are missing. But once we have them, and can see the difference they make, their value might well become vividly apparent. Education empowers, it is said. But power also educates.⁹¹

Finally it might be argued that the individualised control of funds will accentuate a trend towards consumerism in media. Each BBC member will pay for content they want, and then retreat into bubbles where they can be comforted by their own preferred ‘facts’. We do think that the system we propose will increase the opportunities for particular groups and interests to find expression and articulation, and we welcome this. But there are reasons to think this particularistic sense-making will be accompanied by efforts to engage with others on matters of common concern. Crucially, we cannot assess the likely effects of these general

commissioning powers in isolation from the rest of the powers and rights that will secure substantive mutualisation in the context of public media. We return to this point below.

The Membership in the BBC

Substantive mutualisation requires that the membership be present as a permanent and authoritative feature of the BBC's inner workings, across its various missions. Therefore we propose that the next BBC Charter establishes panels, randomly selected from the membership, to serve as proxies for the broader membership in shaping and assessing the operations of the BBC and how its resources are allocated. As well as providing a bridge between the rest of the membership and the institutional structures of the BBC, these panels will help organise and evaluate the content generated through members' commissioning and ensure that, where appropriate, it is reflected in the organisation's own efforts to describe and explain. No doubt the BBC's editors will keep a close eye on what these other publicly funded media discover. But the panels will be able to start a conversation with them if they ever feel that investigations 'in the wild' are not receiving coverage commensurate with their significance on the BBC's own channels and platforms.

These members' panels should be large enough to ensure that they bring significant diversity while being small enough to manage themselves without a vast administrative apparatus. So we

recommend that most of them comprise thirty new members, joined by ten members who stay on from the previous year. Some of these members' panels would be permanent features of the governance and workflow of the BBC, others will be temporary and established for a specific purpose on the authority of the membership. These panels will possess defined powers to praise and censure, to advise, and to make autonomous decisions concerning the use of their time and the public funds allotted to them. These powers are of the essence in the operations of a mutualised BBC. They are important in themselves, and they create incentives for the broader public to pay attention, and hence become more actively and directly engaged.

Random selection generates deliberative bodies that are likely to be diverse and representative across a range of obvious and non-obvious criteria. They will tend toward gender parity and will reflect the ethnic and religious composition of the membership from which they are drawn. They will also tend to include a far broader range of income groups than panels appointed on the basis of celebrity, eminence, expertise or election. The privately educated, who are over-represented in the media, especially at the more senior levels, will for once be very much in the minority. Oxbridge graduates, who already contribute so much to British public life, will have a chance to hear what other people have to say.

Randomly selected panels can also be expected to reflect the existing balance of political opinion more accurately than representative institutions based on voting or on professional discretion. For example, 43% of British people consider socialism to be ‘the ideal political system’ according to a recent poll commissioned by the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Fraser Institute.⁹² It is rare for any public body with any communicative power to include a sizable minority that take this view. Members’ panels in which socialists are a significant presence – perhaps sixteen out of forty – might well bring refreshing new perspectives to the business of newsgathering, as it concerns both the direction of inquiry and the assessment of what inquiry discovers. And the effect on such a body of a year spent helping to shape the news agenda will itself constitute an important kind of knowledge for the BBC’s broader membership. Public opinion is far from fixed and is bound to change as part of the normal operations of a mutualised BBC. Perhaps some of our preferences are based on faulty premises or poor evidence and will change as a consequence of sustained inquiry and deliberation with others. Perhaps some will be confirmed, and become more persuasive to others, in the same way.

More generally these panels will be able to draw on a very broad range of life experiences, whose relevance and value cannot necessarily be predicted in advance. Perhaps most importantly the panels will not be populated exclusively by

the energetically ambitious and socially adept types who flourish in the competitive professions, who populate so many influential positions in civil society, and who all but monopolise elected office. It is plausible that deliberative-investigative bodies so constituted will pay closer attention to the theoretical and structural underpinnings of austerity, or the safety of our high rise buildings, or the mass incarceration of innocent people by the Post Office, for example, than professional commissioners and editors did.⁹³

There are other reasons to think that randomly selected panels might be useful in the context of newsgathering. Challenging the conduct of media outlets is not something that appeals to most journalists. As the investigative reporter Nick Davies, a notable exception, put it, ‘dog doesn’t eat dog.’⁹⁴ And we can see why: other journalists are once and future colleagues and managers. It would be reckless for individuals in a precarious sector to alienate them. As a result, although the media are of prime importance, it is rare to see them subjected to sustained scrutiny by the media themselves. A randomly selected panel of ordinary people has no reason to fear the media, or to hope for favours from it. James Madison once remarked that ‘no man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity.’⁹⁵ At the very least it would be prudent to put disinterested judges in a position to assess the

media's conduct and priorities, in ways that reach broader publics.

Inhibitions about certain kinds of curiosity aren't only a matter of avoiding conscious hostility. As an influential 1998 paper in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* noted, 'communicators are ascribed the very traits implied by their descriptions of others'. We can see how this tendency for audiences to conflate message and messenger – 'spontaneous trait transference' – might discourage those who enjoy public status from speaking out in some contexts. After all, as the paper notes, 'politicians who allege corruption by their opponents may themselves be perceived as dishonest.'⁹⁶ A randomly selected panel that controls the terms on which it publicises its deliberations poses no such threat to the reputation of any of the individuals who constitute it.

As with the general commissioning powers, this is not the place to address all possible concerns and objections to the use of randomly selected bodies in the workflow of media organisations. But we should pause to address something that might seem plausible to some well-intentioned readers. A defender of the *status quo* might want to argue that randomly selected bodies will merely reproduce in miniature the patterns of epistemic privilege and disadvantage found in society at large: in brief, wealthy, educated, white men will tend to overawe the rest. But this seems to us to give much too much credit to

those who currently are privileged in discursive spaces, and to ignore the fact that the ability to reason and argue is not the exclusive possession of those who are self-confident and not often subject to challenge in daily life. Indeed, those who are used to occupying the higher rungs of society are likely to find the experience of civic equality in the panels extremely bracing: it is one thing to tell employees and service workers what to do, quite another to persuade people who are not afraid of you, and who outnumber you. To repeat, at the moment deliberation that reaches large audiences, or that is consequential in the broader spheres of media production, is dominated by the few. Most *Question Time* panellists are millionaires or not far from it. Most editorial meetings are chaired by millionaires, who report to people considerably richer than they are. In randomly selected panels drawn from the membership the few will be in the minority, the many in the majority.

Finally, we should note how the widely distributed powers to commission inquiry discussed above will plausibly interact with the opportunities for deep participation afforded by the panels. Members of the BBC who are currently overlooked, or poorly treated, in the circuits of publicity will be able to fund journalist-advocates, who will have strong incentives to speak persuasively to the panels, and hence to exert influence on the 'mainstream' of media discourse. Indeed, the very existence of the panels will tend to orient member-funded operations towards the 'mainstream': every

outlet will want, where possible, to demonstrate to their supporters that they have changed the BBC's distribution of attention, and hence the wider field of public speech.⁹⁷ This will tend to push against the tendency towards consumerism in an individualised system for media commissioning noted above. As a result, panellists who do not begin their work in a state of sublime epistemic self-confidence will be able to draw on new bodies of knowledge, and find new sources of corroboration, when their views clash with the more privileged.

We do not have to rely on hypotheticals when assessing the deliberative virtues of randomly selected bodies. In recent years a variety of real world examples show how effective they can be in discovering or refining a consensus view of controversial political issues that is of value to broader publics. In the Republic of Ireland the 2012-2014 Constitutional Convention and the 2016-2018 Citizens' Assembly are widely credited with improving the quality of public deliberation in debates about same-sex marriage and abortion respectively. An *Irish Times* editorial arguing against the use of similar bodies in local government felt obliged to concede that '[t]here is no arguing with the fact that the last Citizens' Assembly and the Constitutional Convention that preceded it were a great success.'⁹⁸

In Oregon 'near-randomly selected' panels are tasked with writing a one-page statement

concerning state-wide ballot measures, which includes 'Key Findings', 'Majority' and 'Minority' arguments and a tally of the panel's final vote. In their 2015 review of these Citizens' Initiative Review panels Mark Warren and John Gastil concluded that the evidence suggests that 'the CIR functions as a trusted and effective information source for many Oregon voters, who are tending to view the the still new institution as having a judgmental capacity akin to a jury, and judge it more trustworthy than state and federal legislative bodies.'⁹⁹

The UK has its own notable examples of successful civic deliberation and public decision-making. In recent years civil society groups and activist movements have organised a number of Citizens' Assemblies, Juries and other participatory exercises. In 2020 the UK's media regulator Ofcom commissioned a Citizens' Assembly on Public Service Broadcasting as part of its five-yearly review of the UK's public media sector. This project demonstrated the value and practicality of deliberative democracy for interrogating the public's views on important but complex issues, and highlighted the participants' support for – and competence in engaging with – the core ideals and principles of publicly-owned and publicly-funded media. Among its findings the report noted: 'The quality of the discussions showed that, given enough information and opportunity to discuss, participants were very capable of discussing the complexities of public service provision, and

establishing a view on what aspects of that provision were most important.’ The authors concluded that ‘the deliberative approach offers an important tool for engaging with the public beyond their consumption of content and which relate more to the impact of public service media on their citizenship, and social, cultural and political lives.’¹⁰⁰ The success of the citizens’ assembly model in the context of public media policy has been paralleled in many different contexts. As the philosopher Michael Hannon recently noted, ‘research on mini-publics has consistently shown that when citizens are given the opportunity to deliberate in a structured setting with the help of a moderator, they become better informed about the issues in hand.’¹⁰¹

It might be argued that, despite its many proven successes, the use of randomly selected panels would somehow be inappropriate in the inner workings of the BBC. This would be very difficult to sustain. Many of the recent experiments in deliberation by randomly selected bodies took place in partnership with media institutions, including the public broadcasters PBS in the US and Channel 4 in the UK. And the connection between the deliberating assembly and the broader public provided by television coverage played an important role in their success. One of the pioneers in their use, James Fishkin, notes that ‘[t]hese media partnerships serve to amplify, but they also serve a convening function. They provide a further basis for key

politicians and policymakers to participate.’ He goes on to say that ‘involvement of the media has made the dialogue seem consequential’.¹⁰²

Critics might object that there is little public appetite for greater public involvement in the operations of the media. But here, too, the evidence we have contradicts this pessimism. The participants in Ofcom’s Citizens’ Assembly in 2020 broadly supported democratising ‘public service by increasing transparency, accountability *and giving the public a stronger voice in decision-making*.’¹⁰³ Furthermore, there are good grounds to think that mutualisation itself will increase the public’s propensity to engage with, and comprehend, the operations of the media. As noted above, both *Mutual Interest Media* and the *Bristol Cable* provide evidence for optimism in this regard.

The integration of randomly selected members’ panels in the BBC’s discursive operations will immediately convey to participants and observers the justified sense that what they are doing matters. This is precisely because they will all see that the means exist for the deliberations of civic equals to reach broad publics on transparent terms. One of the weaknesses of previous mini-publics has been their dependence on irresponsible, or outright hostile, media for access to publicity. For example, Ireland’s 2012-14 Constitutional Convention proposed establishing a suite of economic, social and cultural rights, including a universal right to

housing. While other aspects of the Convention's work were widely covered in the media, this was, as far as the authors can tell, completely ignored both in Ireland and in coverage elsewhere. This silence from the media meant that the Oireachtas was able to send the proposal for a right to housing to a committee, and leave it there.¹⁰⁴

A source close to the Irish citizens' assemblies told us that top down political and civil service control was the most important reason for the lack of popular awareness of their work and enthusiasm about their efficacy. But they noted that media interest tended to focus on controversial issues such as same sex marriage and abortion and far fewer journalists reported on the other subject areas of the assemblies. They confirmed that this was particularly true of the only two topics that the assemblies had chosen for themselves: parliamentary reform and economic, social and cultural rights.¹⁰⁵

The access to publicity secured in virtue of their secure and autonomous status in a mutualised BBC will give panel members concrete reasons to take the proceedings seriously: what they decide will matter. Similarly, it will give those seeking public profile, including elected officials, strong incentives to engage. The sense that the participants are doing something consequential will be enhanced by the fact that the panels do not serve at the pleasure of media executives or politicians, but are constitutionally guaranteed

bodies in the mutualised BBC, with responsibilities to act as trustees of the membership, and the powers to do so.

This might not be enough to win over some journalists to BBC reform along these lines. As Shao Ming Lee and others have noted, 'the media has been found to foment the *demise* of mini-publics.'¹⁰⁶ One newspaper columnist described those participating in Ontario's 2007 Citizen Assembly as being 'comprised mostly of retirees, part-time workers, students, homemakers and computer nerds looking for some excitement in their humdrum lives ...'¹⁰⁷ Media attacks on random selection as a means of populating the deliberative assembly in that instance helped defeat a proposal for voting reform. We can expect that some journalists, politicians and commentators will treat the idea of introducing randomly selected bodies drawn from the general public into the operations of the BBC as self-evidently absurd, no matter how often they have proved useful and effective in recent years.

When dealing with scepticism from media workers and other elite groupings we do not have to rely solely on the evidence of recent decades. In classical democracies, sortition was understood to be crucial to democratic governance, since it made concrete and visible the political principle of *isegoria*, equality of voice in the assembly. One of the features of a democracy, Aristotle noted, is that offices 'are filled by lot, either all or at any rate those not

calling for experience or skill.’ Furthermore, in democracies everyone can ‘sit on juries, chosen from all and adjudicating on all or most matters, i.e. the most important and supreme, such as those affecting the constitution, scrutinies and contracts between individuals.’¹⁰⁸

In Athens an Assembly open to all (freeborn, male) citizens claimed for itself supreme authority. But in the historian Robin Osborne’s estimation, ‘[t]he institutional key to Athenian democracy does not lie in the Assembly, for all that the Assembly was the prime democratic body [...] The key institution was surely the Council.’¹⁰⁹ This Council of 500 citizens chosen by lot sat at the centre of democratic government: ‘In addition to its vital function of setting the Assembly’s agenda, the Council had responsibility for the day-to-day administration of state affairs, including meeting foreign delegations and reviewing the performance of outgoing Athenian magistrates.’¹¹⁰ Random selection was by far the most usual method for appointing officials. In fourth century Athens a total of some 1,200 posts were filled by lot, while only around 100 were elected.¹¹¹

Far from being a recipe for chaos, Athens’ interlocking system of general participation, random selection and elections allowed the city to prosper ‘in the hyper-competitive world of antiquity.’¹¹² One of the reasons the Athenian democracy survived for as long as it did was that ‘sortition was used to inhibit the growth of

powerful elites or cliques within the magistracy and in this way it defended the primacy of the democratic assembly against aristocratic or oligarchic subversion.’¹¹³ The retired Florentine civil servant Niccolò Machiavelli was in no doubt that effective supervision of elites requires the empowered attention of large numbers of people. He argued that his city Florence had suffered because its constitution lacked the institutional forms needed to prosecute ambitious magnates: ‘It is not sufficient to indict a powerful citizen before eight judges in a republic; judges must be many in number, because *the few always act in the interest of the few*.’¹¹⁴

Josiah Ober and others have argued that Athenian democracy also succeeded because it was able to mobilise and organise knowledge from large numbers of people in state decision-making. The Council and the other randomly selected boards of magistrates could draw on a diverse range of experience and expertise. Working together the members of these bodies proved adept at making collective use of this store of individual knowledge. Meanwhile, short (usually annual) terms of office meant that the experience of government was widely shared and that the *demos*, as represented in the Assembly, remained unchallenged as the supreme authority in the state. The sustained success of Athens’ government by lot has an important lesson for us. Critics of contemporary democracy like to point out how little we know about public

affairs, how incoherent our beliefs are, and how far we fall short of the ideal of the omniscient citizen.¹¹⁵ This chimes with a common sense that insists that inquiry and the assessment of the results of inquiry are best left to credentialed experts or some other isotope of ‘the great and the good’. But while as individuals we are almost bound to disappoint, the correct unit of analysis for assessing the merits of democracy is the empowered group, not the powerless solitaire.

The main surviving institutional form employing random selection is the Anglo-American forensic jury, in which a group of citizens selected at random are presented with evidence and arguments prepared by adversarial teams of legal advocates under the supervision of a neutral judge. The jury is then asked to make a unanimous, or near-unanimous, determination as to a question of fact: guilty or not guilty, and, in Scotland, not proven. The jury is not asked to make technical decisions as to matters of law and the court can, quite properly, decide to keep it from being aware of information that might prejudice its deliberations. It is an important, but far from sovereign, element of the judicial apparatus. What matters for our purposes is that the jury has proven to be effective in the task of determining the guilt or innocence of accused individuals on the basis of evidence and expert testimony presented to them. Juries, who are necessarily composed of individuals with very different social identities, religious beliefs, and

personal histories, are capable of acting together to settle clearly defined matters of fact.

In the form of mutualisation we propose the BBC’s own journalists as well as independent journalists, who are also often frustrated when they seek to pursue public interest stories in the current media environment, will be able to make the case for their significance to people who are not uniformly rich, privileged and successful, and who are not worried by the career implications of challenging an entrenched elite consensus. The tendency of random selection to prevent procedural capture by well-placed and highly motivated factions will not only improve deliberation and decision-making from the perspective of those who do not belong to those factions. Random selection can also plausibly be expected to improve the circulation of relevant information and analysis throughout the BBC’s information space and beyond. For this reason members’ panels should have independent powers and rights to publicise their findings, and thereby to create new avenues for inquiry.

We also propose that non-managerial production staff should be empowered to elect representatives to liaise with these panels, and that they should also be eligible to serve on employees’ panels that liaise regularly with the members’ panels. These employees’ panels should, among their other duties, be empowered to decide who should enjoy the privilege of presenting, or appearing as identifiable

individuals in, the BBC's content. Too much of British public life has served as a playground for bullies and narcissists, as has been evident from a series of exposés and scandals in recent years. A mutualised BBC should not be. By making on-screen 'talent' accountable to the workforce as a whole it is to be hoped that, in the competition for fame, the balance will tip in favour of those who can, at a minimum, behave appropriately in the workplace.

This broad approach, of general powers and randomly allocated opportunities to engage more deeply with the BBC's operations on behalf of the membership as a whole, can be applied across the journalistic, cultural and educational missions of the BBC, albeit with important differences.

In Defence of Audience Panels and Public Commissioning

Mini-publics created by sortition can sometimes seem like a panacea for democratic reformers. Recent real world successes, such as the Irish Constitutional Convention, have led experts to propose using random selection in a number of contexts, for a number of purposes.¹¹⁶ This has led to something of a backlash among political theorists, who worry that such bodies lack legitimacy to make decisions that rightly belong to elected officials.¹¹⁷ We do not propose that panels selected by lot should be able to override existing democratic institutions and processes. The United Kingdom is a representative

democracy and the model of mutualisation outlined here will not allow randomly selected bodies to encroach on the legislative or executive powers of elected officials. Rather the members' panels are intended to improve the discursive conditions in which the legislature and the executive operate. In certain circumstances the members' panels should be able to remove executives and senior managers. As part of their ordinary operations the members's panels will come into conflict with BBC managers. They will also be able to praise and censure powerful individuals and institutions beyond the BBC in consequential (because they are highly visible) ways. This is inseparable from their function: we wish to make the spectacle of elite discomfort, as well as the celebration of elite virtue, important genres in public media. This publicity will be an important method for drawing broad publics into more direct and active involvement in the BBC's operations. But there is no particular issue of democratic legitimacy at stake. If Parliament wishes, it can always overrule the properly constituted decisions of the independent BBC and convert it into a state broadcaster of the kind found in less liberal regimes.

We need to be clear from the outset about the tasks that bodies created through random selection can be expected to perform well. Here we can proceed with some confidence. The historical record furnishes plenty of evidence that randomly selected bodies are extremely effective in the invigilation of elites, in the

adjudication of matters of fact, and in filling executive offices that do not require particular expertise, where indeed the absence of unusual qualities of mind or pre-existing concerns and commitments constitutes a virtue, since their decisions are likely to be, if not identical to those of the citizen body as a whole, at least not wholly contrary to its interests. Such bodies can also provide useful guidance to the broader public in matters of considerable ethical and conceptual complexity.

These proven virtues give us reason to expect that the panels we propose will provide valuable service to the broader membership, which is to say the public. It is worth quoting Mark Warren and John Gastil here:

In a healthy democracy, citizens should be able to rely on information and judgments from trusted agents in deciding where to focus their scarce cognitive resources. Citizens need trustees to facilitate their participation, but in modern liberal-democratic political systems, these are few and far between. Especially in the more political domains in which citizen participation and judgment are most important but also most cognitively demanding, most political agents are likely to be motivated reasoners and thus poor candidates for anything but partisan forms of selective trust. Without the right kinds of trustees, many citizens lapse into a disaffected distrust of all things ‘political’ and withdraw from public life altogether.¹¹⁸

This is why we propose that the universal right to commission content enjoyed by every member of the BBC be supplemented with more detailed oversight and investigation by randomly selected members’ panels. It is not easy to see how general powers will do what is needed to enhance the powers and capacities of the membership without the work of assessment and promotion for which the panels are well suited. This is hardly surprising if, as deliberative democrats argue, ‘[a]ny gains in rationality are [...] essentially the result of group dynamics: conversation, communication, and argument.’¹¹⁹ Journalism produces a vast quantity of information. The challenge is to organise and order this flood of inputs in ways that serve democratic citizenship. Professional judgment plays a part here. But so, too, does the collective deliberation of people much like the public from which they are drawn.

We might be idly curious about what forty individuals chosen at random independently think about a topic. But we have much more cause to pay attention when those same forty individuals have had time and space to inquire together into the same topic, with the help of a staff, with adequate material support, and while conscious of the weight their findings will have in future public discussions. It is these ordinary, everyday virtues of collective deliberation by civic equals that we wish to bring to bear, especially in news and current affairs.

Mutualisation and Democratic Power

The mode of mutualisation proposed here will allow numerous, quite large, bodies, drawn from the general pool of members, to actively and directly shape the way the BBC fulfils its public purposes. These members' panels will provide deliberative spaces in which consequential discussion of the news, knowledge and cultural production can take place in plain view. All of us will be able to learn what people much like ourselves think about matters of crucial importance, when given the time and resources they need to acquaint themselves with the facts, and to organise their collective response. Direct commissioning by individual BBC members will also create incentives for individuals to join together as more or less formal collective agents, both as funders and as producers of content. It will increase the number of journalistic bodies supported directly by public funds. And it will encourage informal coordination by members to ensure that their shared areas of interest receive adequate attention in the broader structures of communication. The inquiry and analysis supported by public funds allocated by the public will feed into the deliberations of the randomly selected panels in ways that improve their deliberative capacities and preserve their independence.

The two features of BBC membership proposed here – the universal, albeit shallow, power to allocate funds as an individual, and the right to

sit on randomly selected panels that permit much deeper levels of member engagement – should not be considered in isolation. The aim is to generate positive feedback loops between the membership at large and the membership's empanelled and empowered representatives within the BBC. New and surprising content supported by the members will feed into the internal deliberations of the BBC via the panels. These deliberations will lead to authoritative (or at the very least noteworthy) assessments of both the BBC's in-house journalism and the content produced outside. This in turn will help inform changes in the future distribution of public funds. It would not be surprising if at first the public's curiosity closely follows cues given by the private media and the unreformed BBC. Indeed there will doubtless be attempts to organise the members' commissioning on partisan lines. But the content produced will be subject to sustained and consequential scrutiny by ordinary people in a way that is not true now.

The result will be to multiply the opportunities for us to exercise what Hannah Arendt called 'power with', the collective power that depends on voluntary cooperation between individuals who, in virtue of their equal status, are unable to compel one another.¹²⁰ In the context of news and current affairs this 'power with' will take the form of shared sense-making, in which the relevance and reliability of information are assessed, explanations for events are proposed and debated, and the results are formatted in

order to assist the decision-making of the public as a whole. Crucially, the panels will be in a position to compare competing structural accounts of social reality and share both their inquiries and their conclusions with large publics. These opportunities for deliberation between equals will tend to reduce the ability of political and economic elites to frame issues in ways that favour their interests over and above those of the public. As the political scientists James Druckman and Kjersten Nelson note, ‘under certain conditions, citizens’ conversations vitiate elite influence – elite influence via framing might not be so robust in a political world where citizens have access to alternative forms of information.’¹²¹

Diverse bodies drawn from the BBC’s membership will have an opportunity to open up lines of inquiry into matters that elites have already resolved to their own satisfaction, and to develop an independent account of what constitutes relevant information and expertise. This is particularly important if we think it plausible that ‘the present intensification of hyper-polarized partisanship and out-group animus’ is ‘the result of a changing strategy of elite communication.’¹²² And in this context it is worth noting that conspiracism and disinformation are demonstrably features of elite strategies for securing economic and political advantage, for all that they are often explained in terms of popular credulity and perversity.

The power of the members’ panels will be real: its exercise will lead to observable changes in the speech that does so much to shape social reality. Indeed by articulating new accounts of the social world that either reinforce or challenge its underpinning justifications, the panels are powerful in the central sense of ‘the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done.’¹²³ The panels will be powerful because they will motivate the rest of us to think in ways we would not otherwise have done.

The panels’ power will also be democratic, inasmuch as the wider publicity their work enjoys will enhance our ability to shape the individual and collective conditions of our lives. They will enable us to make better use of the universal, albeit modest, power we enjoy as members to fund media projects of which we approve. This universally enjoyed power to commission content will also be democratic, in the archetypal sense that it will confer equality-in-speech to citizens living in complex, and inevitably mediated, information environments.

We live in an information-rich world. But as Herbert Simon pointed out, ‘the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes.’ Information consumes our attention.¹²⁴ The combination of powers outlined is intended to manage an information-rich world in ways that do not favour those with great

wealth and institutional power. It does so by putting all of us, and plausible proxies for all of us, into key positions in the systems of communication and mediation. Scarce resources of attention will be deployed to attach significance to existing information, and to initiate new lines of inquiry, in ways that track the interests of an egalitarian public. We will each have the means to create, and then filter and channel, information flows.

The creation of our shared understanding is too important to be left to a handful of highly unrepresentative functionaries, who are at once comfortably insulated from popular scrutiny and intensely vulnerable to other members of the elite groupings to which they belong. Mutualisation along the lines set out here will provide new institutional means through which the membership can understand the world around it, and can decide when, and how, to change it. There is far more wisdom, intelligence and experience in all the population than in any given fraction of it. It is up to us to design institutions that bring our shared cognitive resources to bear on the challenges that are bound to emerge in the years ahead.

Funding principles for mutualised public media

Public funding for the BBC, both as it currently exists and as a mutualised organisation, should serve two core purposes. First, it should finance the provision of a wide range of media content

and services for all UK audiences that fulfil distinct public purposes across information, education and entertainment. Second, public funding should guarantee and empower collective decision-making about and public participation in the governance, organisation and production of the BBC's public services. Whereas the first purpose is a long-established justification for the TV licence fee, the public's rights as owners of and direct financial contributors to the BBC have never been formalised by either the funding model or the BBC's successive Royal Charters. The principles of mutualisation explored here offer new structures and mechanisms for the public's active and direct involvement in the BBC, but these are dependent on a public funding model that creates a democratic — rather than paternalist or consumerist — relationship between the BBC and its members. Section One of this paper outlined the serious flaws of the existing TV licence fee model, and detailed the significant harms and ineffectiveness of potential commercial alternatives such as advertising and subscription. Without endorsing any particular alternative, we envisage that the funding model for a mutualised BBC should be based on three clear principles — universality, independence and fairness — that ensure the BBC is empowered to fulfil its functions as a public service mutual owned and controlled by the British public.

Universality: the argument for publicly-funded media rests on the notion that access to information, culture and entertainment is necessary for a cohesive society, an effective democracy and individual liberty, and that this access should be guaranteed to all regardless of a person's ability to pay for it. Similarly, publicly funded media can be organised to provide collective benefits for everyone equally, unlike commercial media which by design caters only to the wealthiest, or largest, consumer base, or serves political constituencies and private interests. Universality of funding is therefore both an ideal and practical principle: it creates a direct connection between the BBC and individuals as citizens, who share an equal stake in its role as a national institution; it creates a requirement on the BBC to provide content and services that serve the needs and interests of all; and it ensures that those services are made available free at the point of use and accessible across all devices and formats that are commonly used by its audiences.¹²⁵ To ensure that a mutualised BBC is genuinely owned and controlled by everyone, public contribution to its funding should not be based on anachronistic criteria such as individuals' use of particular media services or technologies (as with the TV licence fee). Rather than linking funding for public media to the use of any particular device, the mechanism for funding the BBC should be device-neutral and payable by all, embodying the principle that there is a vital social and democratic value in a collective national

investment in independent, universal public service media.

Independence: the processes for evaluating, setting and distributing the BBC's income must be entirely independent from government and political control or influence, fully accountable to the public and completely transparent. Numerous civil society groups and parliamentary reports have recommended establishing an independent body for BBC funding, either to advise funding decisions on behalf of the public or granted full responsibility for setting the funding level.¹²⁶ Although there is merit in these proposals, unless it is backed by significant legal guarantees any notionally independent body established by government is still vulnerable to political influence, for example through politicians' power over appointments and threats to undermine or ignore the body's recommendations. Under a mutualised model, the independence of the BBC's funding would be secured by giving the membership itself a direct and leading role in funding decisions. For example, the members could have responsibility for evaluating how effectively the BBC has used its public income, determining on evidence what level of funding is needed to fulfil the BBC's public obligations set by the Membership, and issuing a public notice on the level of funding the Council finds necessary, subject to parliamentary approval. Independence of funding could be further secured by fixing BBC funding settlements to a defined period (e.g. 5

years), improving the security and sustainability of how the BBC funds its services.

Fairness: progressive rating of the BBC's public funding mechanism, reflecting differences in the ability of households or individuals to contribute financially, is essential to ensuring that the BBC's funding model is fair, proportionate and inclusive for all its audiences. This progressive rating could take several forms, for example by having separate funding rates for richer and poorer households or by applying concessions and discounts, similar to the concessions applicable to council tax. Identifying and

applying these progressive rates would require a reformed or alternative mechanism for collecting the BBC's public funding, and the criteria would need to be evaluated and reviewed in a transparent and accountable way – for example whether 'wealth' should be determined by the individual income of the highest earner in a household, combined household income or other markers. There is also need for careful consideration of how creating cohorts of different funding brackets may interfere with the principle of universality in the BBC's financial relationship to the public.

3. A Mutual BBC in outline

The principles informing a mutualised BBC are clear: active and direct involvement of members in its operations requires both universally distributed powers and equal eligibility to serve on bodies tasked with more detailed and sustained engagement with the various aspects of the organisation's missions.

These bodies will, with the help of the BBC's permanent staff, organise information and analysis in the interests of all members, and resist attempts to alienate the membership from their proper place at the centre of decision-making. Any particular application of those principles will depend on the deliberation and judgments of these bodies once they are given authoritative form in the BBC's centenary Charter.

But it is useful to describe in general terms how we envisage such bodies functioning, so that the reader can appreciate how the interactions between the membership and the organisation it owns might be mediated, and improved, through this combination of individual powers and empowered collectives. In the following section we outline how we envisage this working across each of the BBC's broadly defined public purposes.

1. Inform

Journalism is an iterative process, in which the allocation of material resources to particular topics and lines of inquiry is of the utmost consequence. At the moment editorial decisions are exclusively made by people who are in a number of important respects unlike the people in whose interests they (no doubt, sincerely) try to act. As already noted, BBC news editors are much more likely to be public school and Oxbridge educated. They are more likely to be white. They are, in virtue of their work, paid far more than most of the country. It is reasonable to assume that they are more socially adept than average. But they also belong to a social class that stretches across finance, public relations, and government, and they are more likely than average to subscribe to that class's 'common sense', whether consciously or unconsciously.

In a mutualised BBC each member will enjoy the power to assign a defined fraction of the BBC's budget to journalistic projects of which they approve. We suggest that the funds controlled in this way be set initially at 5% of the mutualised BBC's revenues. This would be around £270m of the BBC's 2024 income, a little more than £5.5 for every one of the BBC's 49 million members.¹²⁷ This will break the monopoly that BBC news editors currently enjoy over the allocation of BBC revenues to journalism, while still affording

the BBC's journalistic staff a large and sustainable pool of funding for their own independent investigatory work and general reporting.

As members of the BBC we will each be able to support any journalistic project we wish, so long as the organisations and individuals in receipt of funds sign up to, and abide by, a professional code of conduct and meet other requirements around open access and transparent reporting of project expenditure. Each of us will be free to choose whether to support the production of news and current affairs, or general interest or educational content. (We discuss below how a separate mechanism would be established for cultural and creative enterprises.) All digital content produced with public funding will be made freely available, without commercial copyright restrictions. Direct access to funding by the membership will no doubt encourage the creation of new workers' cooperatives in the sector, while increasing the revenues of those that already exist. Meanwhile billionaire-owned outlets and large public limited companies might struggle to attract this kind of support. But, as was the case in house-building after the First World War, guild organisation is likely to be more efficient than its capitalist rivals in its use of public funds for a very simple reason: there are no shareholders to pay. The material produced by these outlets will be made available on the BBC's platforms, and will be given a

prominence that reflects the reasoned deliberation of the relevant members' panels.

In addition to this commissioning power, each member of the BBC will be eligible to serve on randomly selected panels tasked with assessing journalism and reviewing expenditure in various fields, in partnership with BBC staff. Each News and Current Affairs Panel will consist of forty members drawn from a UK-wide pool, will serve for one year, and will focus on one of the main subject areas of the BBC's newsgathering and reporting. As of the time of writing this would mean establishing members' panels on UK Politics, Business and Economics, Science and Technology, Climate and the Environment, World Affairs, Home Affairs, Family and Education, Health, Sport, and Culture, Media and the Arts.¹²⁸ We further propose that members' panels be convened to oversee the coverage of the constituent UK nations. These too will serve for a year and will be recruited from the relevant national pool. One further UK-wide News and Current Affairs Panel will be tasked with overseeing the conduct and output of individuals and institutions in receipt of funds from the national crowdfunder intended to support journalism. As part of their work they will prepare and present material for the consideration of the other panels.

Finally we propose that Local Members' Panels be established to oversee the BBC's activities, including news and current affairs, in their

areas. These bodies will be selected from local pools and will operate alongside the 39 local radio stations in England, Jersey and Guernsey and their equivalents in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.¹²⁹ The money currently taken from the BBC by the Local Democracy Reporting Service will be reallocated to provide these Local Members' Panels with newsgathering and investigative capabilities in partnership with the BBC's permanent staff. These Local Members' Panels will also coordinate between their communities and the BBC in educational, creative and cultural affairs. There are projects from the BBC's social democratic past that can be drawn on here. In 1972 David Attenborough, then the Controller of Television, pioneered a 'broadcaster-as-publisher' model through the Community Programmes Unit (CPU). The CPU oversaw a number of successful documentaries and discussion programmes, including *The People's Television*, which 'focused on social campaigns that had a local significance, and *People Make Television*, where according to the *Radio Times* content was "produced by the public. Skilled help and advice is available from the BBC's Community Programme Unit"¹³⁰

Each of the News and Current Affairs Panels will be tasked with assessing and assigning salience to the work in news and current affairs conducted by BBC staff and by other media organisations and individuals, whether they are in receipt of public funds via the general membership or not.¹³¹ They will publish their

findings and recommendations to the BBC regarding its future priorities and distribution of resources. In executing this invigilation of the BBC's coverage each panel will determine its own order of business. But they will have the right to interview BBC editors and commissioners and to record and publish their proceedings. It is to be expected that they will hold both open and closed sessions, in which they will be able to hear from a diverse range of interlocutors. The aim of the News and Current Affairs Panels is to strengthen the professional independence and self-confidence of the BBC's own journalism. They are also intended to encourage a dialogue between fulltime BBC journalists and an empowered group that can plausibly stand in for the audience at large. This dialogue will be informed by diverse and decentralised journalism funded by the 'national crowdfunder' described above. The process will never be smooth, or even entirely respectable. None of the panels will ever be exactly like the rest of us. Sometimes they might even be eccentric. But the proposal to introduce them is based on the view that they will consistently serve as a better proxy for the audience than the intuitions of elite in-house commissioners and producers.

In the past the newspapers provided broadcasters with this day-by-day proxy for public opinion. Speaking in 2014 the journalist and broadcaster Robert Peston went so far as to complain that the BBC was 'completely obsessed

by the agenda set by newspapers.¹³² The combined outputs of the panels will provide BBC staff with a much clearer picture of public opinion than could ever be provided by the editorial staff of national newspapers. Private media owned by billionaires will no doubt continue to present themselves as the voice of the people and demand deference on that account. But they will be competing with a knowledge system designed to give structure and weight to what actual people think, when given the opportunity to do so.

We imagine that political parties inside and outside Parliament will be eager to engage with the panels, and that the panels will be eager to hear their perspectives on various matters. But the rest of civil society will also have opportunities to organise and present their point of view to bodies that, while not expert, will provide an opportunity to secure wider publicity for their interests and concerns. The interactions between the Local Members' Panels and the Local Members' Panels will also mean that civil society in this context is not limited to large and well-resourced institutions and their lobbying apparatus. To put things as simply as possible: *quite small and modestly resourced groups will be able to raise the alarm.*

Each member serving on a UK-wide or national News and Current Affairs Panel will be paid the median UK wage for one day a week for twelve months. So, too, will each member of a Local

Members' Panel. This means that each member of one of these members' panels will receive around £7,500 per year for their service. At their full strength of 40 members – 30 new members and 10 held over from the previous year – the wage bill for each panel will be some £300,000. If we establish a total of 66 panels the immediate cash outlay before overheads will be some £19.8m. We also recommend that each of these panels have a modest discretionary budget for research and investigation, as well as a defined claim on the BBC's administrative resources.

Taken together the operating costs of these members' panels will be significant. But we expect them to generate significant savings, by reducing or eliminating altogether the need for the BBC to engage in costly market research and consultations. Note that in 2022-3 the BBC spent £137m on collecting the licence fee: a universal, mutualised BBC that dispensed with the licence fee would be able to reinvest this money to ensure that those serving on the members' panels are adequately paid and have the resources they need with which to fulfil their duties to the membership.¹³³

Set against the budget of the BBC as a whole, the costs of the members' panels seem somewhat more modest, especially when they are so central to ensuring that ordinary members are actively and directly involved in the public purposes of the BBC. The wage bill for the News and Current Affairs Panels we propose, £19.8m, is around

0.37% of the BBC's 2024 income of £5.39b. To give some idea how that compares with other costs, in 2015 the Guardian reported that the BBC had spent almost £12m on taxis in the previous year.¹³⁴ Business organisations and political parties currently commit large sums to quantitative and qualitative research into public opinion in the form of polls and focus groups. The data generated is often kept secret and used for strategic purposes in the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Indeed the ambition of these sectional groups is to privatise public opinion through the use of market research techniques. General commissioning and the News and Current Affairs Panels will provide a public service alternative, through which the production of public opinion, and its evolution over time, are made transparent, and given a thoroughly public character.

If effective mutualisation requires an increase in overall funding, then so be it. By some estimates the corporation has lost nearly 40% of its real terms funding since 2010.¹³⁵ But a restoration of the BBC's purchasing power must go hand-in-hand with the integration of its members as active and direct participants in its governance and operations. Indeed the reforms we propose are intended to generate a convening power equivalent to that exercised by the centrally directed system of broadcast established in the 1920s and still in place today. Only the drama and excitement of deliberation between equals can hope to compete with the vast apparatus of

distraction and division that the commercial digital media companies are busy creating. The costs of this endeavour are insignificant when set against the costs of doing nothing.¹³⁶

As already noted, each News and Current Affairs Panel will be tasked with assessing the quality of BBC and non-BBC coverage of their subject areas, ranking the importance and public value of news items, and encouraging BBC staff to pursue stories and distribute resources in a way that reflects that order of priorities. Each panel will also be empowered to review decisions made by the Executive Complaints Unit and, where appropriate, publish their own findings. They will hold public sessions and non-managerial BBC staff will be entitled to speak with them confidentially about matters of public interest. Trade unions at the BBC will also have the right to address the News and Current Affairs Panels. BBC managers will have to make themselves available for interview, as and when requested. The judgments of these panels will feed transparently into the personalisation algorithms the BBC develops, and into any AI development that the organisation conducts. Each News and Current Affairs Panel will also have the right to publish their findings, judgments and observations on a unanimous, majority and minority basis, using the social media resources at their disposal, including any created by the BBC itself. This ability to speak, and speak with the representative authority derived from random selection, is crucial to the

public utility of the members' panels. At the end of their term each panel will publish an annual report and will have an opportunity to prepare audio and video content for the rest of the membership. They will also have an opportunity to brief their successors. Ten members of each News and Current Affairs Panel will stay on for a second (and final) year.

The membership at large will also have the power to establish temporary panels of inquiry to investigate particular matters of public concern. The BBC will provide platform resources through which its members can discover and rank its priorities in this regard. These panels of inquiry will similarly be recruited at random from a UK-wide, national or local pool of members, as appropriate. They will also serve for a year and will be allocated a budget with which to fund investigations, to conduct interviews, and to organise existing information. Needless to say, their findings will be given due prominence on the BBC's channels and platforms.

Mutualisation of the BBC's newsgathering and analysis succeeds or fails to the extent that it creates a distinctively democratic regime of knowledge production. By this we mean a regime in which ordinary people are able to intervene in areas of inquiry and topics that oligarchic interests would prefer to pass over in silence, or leave to the distortions of sensationalists and traders in misinformation. In particular this

requires that members of the BBC are able to organise to identify deceptive actors and to reduce their credibility in a sober and proportionate manner. There is no way to reduce, let alone eradicate, misinformation and disinformation that serves powerful interests if ordinary people are not themselves able to organise an irresistible countervailing power against them. The creation of this countervailing power is the aim and object of our proposals for news and current affairs.

2. Educate

At the moment the BBC largely focuses on preschool, primary and secondary education in seeking to fulfill its formal mission to educate.¹³⁷ There is some general and adult education provision. But this sits outside the core of the BBC's current educational mission. A mutualised BBC will be able to move more decisively into education in other civil society settings through partnerships with organisations including universities, museums, libraries, and trade unions. It will also be able to create institutional spaces in which members themselves take a much more active part in the production of knowledge.

Of course the BBC is already mindful of its educational responsibilities in its factual programming. As noted above, it devotes considerable resources to its coverage of science, the climate, family and education, health, science and technology. The members' panels

discussed in the context of news and current affairs will help the BBC align its coverage with the priorities of disinterested representatives of the general membership.

Outside of news and current affairs and its work for school-age children the BBC raids academia for telegenic presenters, and so makes national and international icons out of the likes of Simon Schama, Brian Cox and Lucy Worsley.¹³⁸ Meanwhile the public's confidence in the authority of this centralised knowledge production is being undermined by the proliferation of heterodox narratives and claims online. We therefore recommend that the mutualised BBC introduces a system of subject panels organised around disciplinary areas in the natural, human and social sciences, to be recruited from voluntary pools. Each member would be eligible to enter one educational subject pool, or one of the equivalent pools in cultural production we discuss below.

Those selected at random to serve on these Subject Panels in Education would receive modest compensation and expenses, and would be tasked with reviewing the BBC's coverage and recommending improvements. They would also have an opportunity to assess the scholarship in their field and make public recommendations regarding the distribution of publicity given to it. Where appropriate they would be empowered to make direct representations to the News and Current Affairs Panels about matters which they

believe deserve more sustained investigation. Membership organisations and other groups in civil society, including schools and universities, would also be encouraged to create their own voluntary pools, from which corresponding panels based outside the BBC could be recruited. In this way academics working in particular disciplines, members of professional bodies and trade unions, and all manner of self-organised associations, would be able to enter into a structured and moderated relationship with the membership of the BBC, and with its professional and technical apparatus.

This network of subject panels would be overseen by four members' panels recruited from the national pools on the same basis as the permanent News and Current Affairs panels outlined above. These would synthesise the findings and recommendations of the subject panels and engage with both the BBC's management and with the relevant public authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively. These four panels would also have some independent commissioning powers with which to trial new kinds of educational content and practice, in order to open up new avenues of inquiry in science and the humanities. As with news and current affairs, BBC members could also create temporary panels to explore specialist, or currently obscure, topics. The panellists for these temporary bodies would be drawn from the UK-wide pool, and would act in concert with the

relevant subject panels already drawn from voluntary pools and with the relevant panels in News and Current Affairs where appropriate. They would be paid at the same rate as other temporary panels established by subscription.

As well as these various bodies appointed by lot, the BBC should also provide means to encourage and enable peer-to-peer learning. As it stands the private digital platforms dominate in such fields as ethical instruction, health and fitness, and in the popularisation of science broadly defined. Foreign language learning is also largely left to private developers. There is an urgent need for a public infrastructure of instruction that is embedded in, and accountable to, democratic publics, and that permits a diverse range of experiments in education. This mission to support educational endeavour at scale would be achieved both by digital means and through partnerships with libraries, museums, universities and schools and other institutions. The local panels discussed above in the context of news and current affairs would take part in developing these partnerships.

The educational work of the BBC can, and should, be used to help inform a broader ambition to create a society characterised by lifelong learning. In both academic and skills-based training, and in the synthesis of the two, a mutualised BBC would provide a forum in which its members could discuss what works, and what doesn't, in the current educational system. It

would also provide resources to explore new initiatives. For example, it could work with the cooperative movement to develop new forms of 'guild' education, in which sector-specific skills training could be combined with a grounding in theoretical resources useful in creating enterprises with substantive worker ownership and control. A great deal of publicly funded education currently prepares students to take their place in capitalist enterprises. A mutualised BBC could seek to redress the balance so that the corporate world can enjoy the rigours of competition from a sophisticated and self-confident cooperative sector. As the mutualised BBC finds its footing it is bound to act as a vector for the transmission of cooperative values and practices throughout the rest of society. Indeed, to some extent the success of its educational mission depends on the vitality of a corroborating network of institutions in civil society.¹³⁹

3. Entertain

There are considerable advantages to be gained over capitalist enterprise by applying membership dynamics to the assessment of cultural production. A mutualised BBC can take advantage of the functionality of digital communications to create a detailed picture of what its audiences value, without the need to engage in data-harvesting for the purposes of monetisation. It can also make much more systematic use of the conscious and reflective contributions of its members.

The major movie studios are de-risking cultural output from the point of view of securing a return on investment by producing content that consistently delivers at least some of what the audience values. In recent years we have seen this trend most obviously in the exploitation of Marvel's intellectual property. The studios have calculated that they don't have to produce the best films, they only have to convince the audience that the films on offer won't be *too* disappointing. In this respect familiarity goes a very long way. Meanwhile there is a great deal of independent and non-American film and television production that suffers from a lack of salience in the information space. It gets lost in the churn.

Randomly selected bodies drawn from various general and voluntary pools of BBC members would assess cultural content. Some of these Audience Juries would be simply indicative: they would publish reviews of films, television shows and other media. Others would award modest cash prizes. In all instances our aesthetic judgments would feed into the algorithmic organisation of cultural content. The idea here is to de-risk cultural consumption by making it less likely that members will waste an evening watching something they don't enjoy at all, while massively increasing the chances that they will have a profoundly meaningful aesthetic experience, or a good laugh, depending on what they are in the mood for. We can change the risk-reward calculus people make when they're

deciding what to consume by giving them access to the preferences of panels who are variously constituted: by interest, age group, geographical location, or some combination of all these. With a bit of a care, a system like this would outperform commercial algorithms, which work on a 'people who we think are like you sat through this' principle, rather than on a 'people relevantly similar to you, or of interest to you in some other way, thought this was amazing' principle. These juries could also be convened to assess other forms of cultural production, from classical music to video games, contemporary literature to stand-up comedy. In this way the BBC would become an agent for organising and classifying global cultural production in the interests of global audiences.

Some of these Audience Juries would assess the BBC's own output and recommend it to viewers. The viewers themselves, organised as a kind of mass jury, would also have the power to award prizes and allocate funding to creative teams whose previous work they valued. If, on reflection, the people who pay for the BBC greatly appreciate and admire something, its creators should be publicly recognised and rewarded, and they should be entitled to further public funding with which to explore their creative vision further. In this context we think it would be useful to introduce a scheme along the lines of the Artistic Freedom Voucher proposed by the economist Dean Baker. Each BBC member would have the right to direct an

indicative sum, £5, say, to an artistic or cultural project that they particularly value. As with the journalism funds, the distribution of the money would be made public, so that we could all gain valuable insights into what our fellow citizens have enjoyed in the past, and feel moved to support in the future.

This ability to allocate resources for new production will naturally tend to shift commissioning decisions outwards from the centre and away from the highly paid professionals who currently do so much to shape our cultural space. Exactly how this devolution of cultural power is structured will develop over time. But at the outset it seems reasonable to integrate a system of place-specific Audience Juries with the existing local radio network. Here, too, the Local Members' Panels discussed earlier will play a coordinating role.

This approach will, it is hoped, encourage creative teams to develop deep connections with particular places and communities, and bring the highest aesthetic endeavour into a dialogue with the world as it is, and the world that we might come to want. Mutualisation should multiply the centres of creative excellence in the country and bring home to all BBC members the sense that life happens everywhere, even and especially where they live. As with the Community Programmes Unit there are, if not precedents, intimations of what might be possible that we can find in the BBC's past.

1994's *Shakespeare on the Estate* is a famous example of what happens when programme makers take seriously the possibility that art can have a place, and generate new meanings, outside of the circuits of upper-middle-class and metropolitan respectability. Mutualisation offers the prospect of a creative sector in which this insight becomes a core operating assumption rather than the prompt for a daring and isolated experiment.¹⁴⁰ As in journalism and education, it is to be expected that this direct access to public support will encourage the spread of cooperative and guild organisation in the creative sector, with all that that entails for workplace culture and the distribution of rewards. For far too long the creative sector has been a playground for bullies and narcissists and worse. A mutualised BBC will create a space in which people can develop their talents to their fullest extent without having to put themselves in harm's way.

At a national and international level the conscious judgment of general and specialist pools can be combined with audience data to create a system of appraisal and recommendation which will constitute an algorithmic public service alternative to the commercial sector's promotional apparatus. This task of organisation and discrimination in partnership with its membership should be at the heart of the BBC's cultural mission.¹⁴¹

4. *Connect*

Mutualisation across all of the BBC's missions succeeds to the extent that enables the membership as a whole to play a direct and active part in their execution. This will only be possible through a massive effort of inquiry, analysis and communication. The many bodies, formal and informal, we propose will generate a steady flow of outputs whose significance and relevance – to the operations of the BBC and to the interests and concerns of the membership – will then have to be assessed. The necessary work of articulation will require a close collaboration between professionals animated by public service values and the membership itself, acting as individuals through the exercise of universal powers, as self-organising collectives, and as official bodies appointed by lot. The multiplication of opportunities for deliberation between equals is central to the process of mutualisation. But it is important to put in place a large and well-resourced body to provide a focus for this gargantuan work of collective sense-making.

We therefore recommend establishing a Members' Council to sit alongside the BBC's senior management. Each year 90 members of the BBC will be chosen by lot to serve on this Members' Council full-time for one year at the median wage. At the end of their term each Members' Council will choose 30 of their number to join the 90 new members in the following year's Members' Council. No member

will serve for more than two years. When up and running the Members' Council will therefore consist of 120 members of the BBC. Its primary responsibility will be to oversee and organise the business of the BBC as a member-funded and member-led media organisation. This Members' Council will help the members of the BBC discover their priorities, and ensure that they are given institutional expression in newsgathering, education, and cultural production.

The various bodies appointed by lot, the BBC's staff and their trade unions, and self-organising groups of members should have opportunities to present their findings and concerns to this Members' Council. It would then be responsible for organising them into an agenda for their discussions with BBC management.

The Members' Council would also be responsible for drafting a note of review every five years. At the end of each ten-year Charter this note of review will take the form of an open letter to Parliament. This letter will be based on widespread deliberation by the membership and will set out proposals for the terms on which the BBC's Charter as a public mutual should be reviewed. The deliberation process will draw on the resources of the BBC to ensure that the membership are aware of the options available to it. Local conventions will intersect with nationally oriented panels to develop a shared vision for the next Royal Charter. The letter to Parliament will include proposals for a real term

financial settlement and a draft of its revised public purposes. The Members' Council will also propose changes to the organisation of Members' Panels through the creation of new bodies, or by changing the subjects covered by those that already exist.¹⁴² The members as a body will have the power to reject the draft letter and appoint a new Members' Panel, if a majority of the membership wish it. The membership will also have a right to vote on proposals to demutualise the BBC. This veto power will ensure that the deliberations that inform the BBC's new Charter will be inclusive and thorough. On the other hand, if Parliament rejects the membership's proposals it will have the right to leave the terms of the previous Royal Charter in place while they negotiate a compromise with the BBC, or to pass legislation abolishing the independence of the BBC. Parliament will, of course, have the last word. But the country's main public media institution must not be subject to governmental interference behind closed doors. If it resolves to destroy the country's leading chartered mutual, a constitutional crisis playing out in plain view seems like a fair price to pay.

As discussed above, alongside their deliberative and executive virtues, randomly selected bodies serve as a useful protection against elite collusion. The Members' Council would therefore be tasked with assessing, and where necessary, correcting the conduct of the organisation's appointed managers. All

appointments to the BBC's board would be interviewed and confirmed by this Members' Council. If a majority of the Council lose confidence in a board member, or in the board as a whole, they will have the power to remove them. This power will extend to senior managers. Each outgoing Members' Council will also have an opportunity to recommend dismissal of individuals, or the board, to its successor. The senior management of the BBC should be afraid of the membership and eager to avoid conflict with it by engaging candidly and in good faith with the Members' Council that stands in for them in the day-to-day administration. If they are not properly afraid of the Members' Council, then active and direct involvement by ordinary members soon becomes a sham, and mutualisation fails.

The Members' Council, like all panels appointed by lot, will be served by a newly created administrative division of the BBC, the Secretariat. This new division will have a formal mandate to ensure, to the fullest extent possible, under the auspices of the Members' Council, the active and direct involvement of the membership in the activities of the BBC. It will be responsible for providing the panels, and the membership at large, with information and administrative assistance. It will also be responsible for communications between the panels and the membership, and for assisting the various journalistic, educational and cultural projects that recommend themselves to the membership.

This task of connecting and informing the membership in pursuit of the BBC's public purposes will naturally include the creation of new, public service, platform capabilities at the BBC, so that BBC members can communicate among themselves to discover and promote their individual and collective interests, however they come to be understood. This BBC Secretariat will have a permanent presence on the BBC's board.

Together the Members' Council and the Secretariat form the buckle that connects the BBC with its governing membership. It is crucial therefore that the Secretariat is dedicated to the principles of substantial and civic mutualism. A 30-member Governance Panel drawn from, and reporting directly to, the Members' Council will oversee its operations. The News and Current Affairs Panels, the Subject Panels in Education and the Audience Juries will liaise with the Secretariat and it will be shadowed by an employees' panel recruited by random selection from the non-managerial staff of the BBC. The Secretariat's remit will include the training of moderators and the content of this training will be overseen by the members' Governance Panel. The BBC will become a training ground for democratic governance and over time will create a body of experienced moderators drawn from a range of backgrounds, whose practical experience will feed back into the Secretariat's knowledge base. At all times the principle of active and direct involvement in the operations of the BBC on the part of its membership will be

at the centre of the Secretariat's concerns: it will exist, over and above any other considerations, to make mutualisation work.

In an internet-led media environment the BBC will clearly need social media type functionalities if it is to survive as a central player in our national life. After mutualisation, members will need the BBC's platform to provide a space in which to find what interests them, and to find those who share their interests. They will also need resources with which to organise themselves as viewers and listeners, as commissioners of content and as civic subjects. If the member of the BBC are to involve themselves directly in its core activities then they will need digital, as well as physical and financial, resources with which to do so. We have the technology and expertise to create this structure for egalitarian and democratic participation. We should take advantage of it. The potential here is enormous: for-profit platforms are not primarily interested in hosting high quality deliberation between civic equals, or in organising content in the service of such deliberation. There is work being done now that can inform the design of the BBC's new digital assets, by New Public in the United States, among others.¹⁴³

A public service platform of this kind would be a first in the world and a model for others. Its creation would raise questions about what else in the digital space would benefit from the

existence of a public option. The market has proven incapable of delivering a non-addictive, non-abusive suite of digital resources and the public can reasonably expect a non-profit alternative, *which it owns*, to do so now, especially when the existing market leaders are actively, and very publicly, making their offering worse in pursuit of profit.¹⁴⁴ For example, the BBC's Secretariat would be well placed to create a search functionality that serves clearly defined and transparent public purposes. It would also be able to create digital resources that help individual members to make better informed choices in national and local elections. But it is up to the membership to decide on the objectives of the public service innovation undertaken by the BBC. After the BBC establishes itself as a public social media platform the budget for the further development of its digital offering can be set at a modest 5% of the total budget, and reviewed at five-year intervals. We suggest that the Members' Council oversee these investment funds in partnership with the BBC's permanent staff during its centenary charter.

Elsewhere the authors have previously argued for the creation of a 'British Digital Cooperative' to drive public investment and innovation in

technologies for the public good.¹⁴⁵ This is beyond the scope of the current set of proposals, but with the necessary wider public investment, a mutualised BBC could become the cornerstone of a wider network of civic and non-for-profit platforms and apps, and a central component of a broader UK public digital infrastructure. Digital platforms are, by their nature, global and the benefits could be felt far beyond the UK. Membership of the BBC's platform could be extended on a paying basis to non-residents. A proportion of the subscription revenue generated can be made available to fund projects and institutional forms that recommend themselves to this global membership.

As part of the creation of the BBC platform, all members – national or international – should enjoy access to its archives and be able to use its content for commercial and non-commercial purposes according to a defined schedule of royalties. The BBC's secretariat will also be tasked with collating and organising public realm content, and with digitising and organising significant public archives in partnership with museums, universities and other bodies

Conclusion

Our intention in this report has been to prepare the BBC for the future. This means being clear-sighted about some of the BBC's failures and weaknesses, as well as its achievements and its strengths. The integration of the BBC with its public on terms of civic equality and mutual recognition is the only means through which a public service broadcaster can hope to survive at the heart of our media system in the digital age. That, at least, is our contention.

It is extremely unlikely that this first attempt to describe a mutualised BBC will be adopted wholesale. Nothing like this has ever been attempted, and before now the possibility has scarcely been contemplated. We have described here what we think could work in an effort to encourage, not to narrow or foreclose, debate on the future of the BBC.

Inevitably we have scarcely been able to touch on some issues. We have not dealt with the question of funding in great detail. And we have paid much more attention to news and current affairs than to the cultural and educational missions of the BBC. We hope that others will be prompted by what we have written here to take up the challenge of imagining how education and entertainment could be transformed through the active participation of an empowered membership. A fully developed plan for mutualisation will have to consider the relationship between the BBC and the

constituent nations of the United Kingdom more systematically. Media policy experts will notice at once that we have little to say about regulation in general, or Ofcom in particular. This is beyond the scope of this report. We acknowledge, though, that how a mutualised BBC should relate to Ofcom, as well as other public institutions, will need careful consideration. Briefly, we consider that there is much technical work that Ofcom can do to help us track the BBC's successes and failures in meeting its public purposes. This should continue. But matters of editorial judgment must, in the final analysis, belong to the BBC membership. Similarly Ofcom's expanded powers to constrain the BBC on the basis of 'market impact', without any complementary thought for the impact on the public interest of material changes in the BBC's services, should also be given over to the decisions of the BBC's members. The structures we propose will enable us to play our part in the necessary work of invigilation.

Of course, there are bound to be good faith objections to our proposals, and we welcome them. After all, we are proposing to radically re-engineer the internal workings of a vast and intricate machine, the products of which could not be more important. Such change, especially when it involves a degree of institutional innovation, cannot be without risks. But we hope that fair-minded readers will be able to see past any errors in, or disagreements over, the details

to the core of our argument: only successful mutualisation can now preserve the BBC, and if mutualisation is to succeed it must result in an increase in the communicative power of each of us alone, and of all of us together.

Bad faith objections are also to be expected, and we look forward to them. One argument we anticipate is that the public are simply not interested in the internal workings of the BBC, and will not welcome the opportunities for active and direct engagement that mutualisation will bring. But public indifference is one problem the BBC has never had to contend with. Neither has this been our experience in our years writing and speaking about the organisation. The other argument we anticipate concerns practicality, complexity and capacity. The organisational changes that we propose remain, at this point at least, theoretical, and necessarily somewhat abstract. Their success depends on the sound judgements of the public who will make up the BBC membership. It is less fashionable than it once was to openly deride the working class, or

women, or some other group, on the grounds of their intellectual feebleness, or frivolity, or indifference to public business. The BBC was created at a time when class prejudice and the perversities of race science were something close to the common sense of our imperial ruling class.

Today we will have to contend with a more sophisticated rhetoric of reaction. Critics may question how any ordinary member of the public could be up to the task. They may even modestly declare that they cannot perform the role we seek to give the membership, the better to persuade us that none of us can. The conclusion will be that nothing should be done.

But in any media organisation judgments must be made about what should be investigated, and about what will be created. Judgements must be made about how information about the world beyond our immediate reach comes to us, and about what that information means. If there is a future for public media, it is a future in which we, the public, will make these judgments together.

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- ³⁵ Good Things Foundation's 2024 Digital Nation report calculates that as many as 8.5 million people in the UK lack the skills, resources or means to access online services and digital platforms. Good Things Foundation, 'Our Digital Nation', 2024, <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/policy-and-research/research-and-evidence/research-2024/digital-nation>
- ³⁶ Ampere Analysis, 'Submission to House of Lords Communications Committee inquiry into BBC future funding', 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107559/pdf/>
- ³⁷ BBC, *BBC News (6pm)*, BBC One, 27 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/ecu/bbc-news-6pm-bbc-one-27-august-2024>
- ³⁸ Justin Lewis, 'Newspapers, not the BBC, led the way in biased election coverage' *The Conversation*, 15 May 2015, <https://theconversation.com/newspapers-not-bbc-led-the-way-in-biased-election-coverage-41807>. Stephen Cushion et al, 'Newspapers, impartiality and television news: Intermedia agenda-setting during the 2015 UK General Election campaign', *Journalism Studies*, Vol.19 No.2, 2016, pp.162-181.
- ³⁹ Mills, *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service*.
- ⁴⁰ Rosamund Urwin, 'The Long Goodbye?', *Sunday Times*, 12 January 2025.
- ⁴¹ Jane Martinson, 'Don't Ignore Public Opinion on BBC, Trust Chair Warns Culture Secretary', *Guardian*, 4 February 2016.
- ⁴² John Shields, 'The BBC's Advisory Bodies in 1968', *Radio Times* (North of England with Radio Merseyside edition), 28 September – 4 October 1968, <https://transdiffusion.org/2016/12/29/the-bbcs-advisory-bodies-in-1968/>
- ⁴³ BBC, 'BBC Charter for fifteen years from 1 August 1981 to 31 December 1996', https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_framework/charter_agreement/archive/1981.pdf
- ⁴⁴ Shields, 'The BBC's Advisory Bodies in 1968', *Radio Times* (North of England with Radio Merseyside edition), 28 September – 4 October 1968.
- ⁴⁵ Burton Paulu, *Television and Radio in the United Kingdom*, University of Minnesota Press, 1981, pp.138-140.
- ⁴⁶ BBC Trust, 'Our Promise To You: How the Trust will engage with audiences. The BBC Trust's Audience Engagement Protocol', undated, https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_framework/protocols/e1_audience_engagement.pdf
- ⁴⁷ BBC, 'BBC Accountability-England – Regional Advisory Councils', undated, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/england/acc/regional/index.shtml>
- ⁴⁸ BBC, *BBC Handbook 1980. Incorporating the Annual Report and Accounts 1978-79*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1980, pp.39-44.
- ⁴⁹ Paulu, *Television and Radio in the United Kingdom*, 140.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ This is also one of the reasons why we do not recommend creating a ‘slimmed down’ or ‘more modest’ BBC. Educational and creative content, as well as the interactive communication provided by social media, are profoundly important in shaping subjectivities and worldviews.

⁵² Tim Davie, ‘A BBC for the Future’, Speech delivered 26 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2024/a-bbc-for-the-future-tim-davie-director-general>

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ The BBC already has an impressive track record in public value technological innovation. In a mutualised context the organisation’s considerable strengths in this regard could be used to foster a more robustly independent intellectual culture within the institution and beyond.

⁵⁵ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p.6.

⁵⁶ Benkler, Faris and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, p.5.

⁵⁷ Jim Waterson, ‘Half a million households cancelled BBC licence fee last year’, *Guardian*, 23 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/jul/23/half-million-households-cancelled-bbc-licence-fee-last-year>

⁵⁸ Mark Sweney, ‘Miliband and Jowell: BBC should be a co-operative’, *Guardian*, 5 August 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/aug/05/bbc-david-miliband-tesa-jowell>

⁵⁹ BBC, ‘BBC should become mutual company - Dame Tessa Jowell’, 21 October 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24613224>

⁶⁰ Lizzy Buchan, ‘The BBC should be owned by those who pay for it, Lisa Nandy says’, *Independent*, 22 February 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/lisa-nandy-labour-leadership-contest-bbc-ownership-tv-licence-a9352406.html>

⁶¹ A process vividly described by Cory Doctorow as ‘enshittification’. See Cory Doctorow, ‘“Enshittification” is coming for absolutely everything’, *Financial Times*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/6fb1602d-a08b-4a8c-baco-047b7d64aba5>

⁶² Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), ‘A Guide to Mutual Ownership Models’, 2011, p.2, *emphasis added*, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a789b46e5274a277e68e099/11-1401-guide-mutual-ownership-models.pdf>

⁶³ G.D.H. Cole, *The Cooperative Movement in a Socialist Society*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1951, p.28. It is striking that education and government feature alongside production and distribution here.

⁶⁴ Cole, *The Cooperative Movement in a Socialist Society*, p.31.

⁶⁵ Clara Mattei, *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism*, Chicago University Press, 2023, pp.95-98.

⁶⁶ <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/node/43772>

⁶⁷ <https://newint.org/about>

⁶⁸ Gareth Brown and Keir Milburn, 'Commoning the Public: Translating European Municipalism to the UK Context', Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2024, [https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/engl/Commoning the Public March 2024.pdf](https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/engl/Commoning_the_Public_March_2024.pdf)

⁶⁹ <https://www.mutualinterest.coop/>

⁷⁰ Correspondence with the authors.

⁷¹ Correspondence with the authors.

⁷² Given that we are interested in making the BBC a public possession – a *res publica* – the neo-republican revival in political theory seems particularly pertinent here.

⁷³ BBC, 'Public Purposes of the BBC in the 2017 Charter', undated, <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>

⁷⁴ BBC, 'Public Purposes of the BBC in the 2007 Charter', undated, https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/governance/tools_we_use/public_purposes.html

⁷⁵ No doubt the Foreign Office will seek to ensure that the global responsibilities of the BBC are not overlooked. In this paper we have focussed on the BBC's domestic operations, rather than on its substantial global role. It is enough to note that the BBC's capacity to reach large audiences in Africa, Asia and elsewhere will depend increasingly on its digital capabilities, which will only be able to compete with large commercial competitors if they leverage the active and direct engagement of co-creating audiences through mutualisation. How this is paid for, and how the 'home' and 'world' services interact, should form part of the consultations between now and 2028.

⁷⁶ International Cooperative Alliance, 'Statement on the Co-operative Identity', 1995, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091009034857/http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>

⁷⁷ Federation for a Co-operative Commonwealth, 'Constitution of the CCF (Ontario Section)', 1944, p.1, https://vault.library.uvic.ca/concern/generic_works/151498b3-fe08-419e-9f47-ca15d055beb5?locale=it

⁷⁸ Nationwide, 'Have your say: Our AGM', 2024, <https://www.nationwide.co.uk/about-us/have-your-say/our-agm/>

⁷⁹ Simon Neville, 'Co-operative Group Sells 774 pharmacies for £620m', *Independent*, 18 July 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/cooperative-group-sells-774-pharmacies-for-ps620m-a405171.html>. BBC, 'Co-op Bank apologies and confirms £1.3bn losses', 11 April 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-26967020171.html>;

Jill Treanor, 'Co-op Bank Report Hits Out at Poor Management and Overambition', *Guardian*, 30 April 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/apr/30/co-op-bank-report-poor-management-over-ambition>

⁸⁰ Since the collapse of its bank the cooperative group has introduced a number of reforms to address the problems we describe as 'hollow mutualism'. The authors do not take a view on their efficacy. It is presumptuous enough to opine at length on the structures needed for public media without weighing in

on debates about the structures best suited to retail and finance. The point to emphasise is that a retail or banking business has only so much to tell us about how to structure a public service media organisation: if discussion is limited to the extant model large mutuals represent, the case for BBC mutualisation will not convince.

⁸¹ BBC, ‘British, Bold, Creative: The BBC’s Programmes and Services in the Next Charter’, 2015, <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/futureofthebbc2015.pdf>

⁸² Patrick Barwise and Peter York, *The War Against the BBC: How an Unprecedented Combination of Hostile Forces is Destroying Britain’s Greatest Cultural Institution, and Why You Should Care*, London: Penguin, 2020.

⁸³ In Section Three we advocate for elections to appoint BBC staff representatives, for example, since the electors will be well placed to assess the merits of the various candidates.

⁸⁴ Gabriel Milland, ‘Budget build-up: Why Labour is on a collision course with voters on tax’, Portland Communications, 16 October, 2024, <https://portland-communications.com/uk-politics/budget-build-up-why-labour-is-on-a-collision-course-with-voters-on-tax/>

⁸⁵ David Broockman and Christopher Skovron, ‘Bias in Perceptions of Public Opinion among Political Elites’, *American Political Science Review*, Vol.112, No.3, 2018.

⁸⁶ Stefan Walgrave, et al., ‘Inaccurate Politicians: Elected Representatives’ Estimations of Public Opinion in Four Countries’, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol.85, No.1, 2023.

⁸⁷ Zoe Williams, ‘How the Actual Magic Money Tree Works’, *Guardian*, 29 October 2017.

⁸⁸ John H. McKendrick et al., ‘The Media, Poverty and Public Opinion in the UK’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/narrative-change/the-media-poverty-and-public-opinion-in-the-uk>

⁸⁹ Correspondence with the authors, 30 January 2025. Chistensen goes on to describe how the BBC responded to an opportunity to screen an independently produced documentary about the offshore system: ‘In mid-2017 I met a commissioning team at the BBC in an attempt to persuade them to screen a 52 minute version of *The Spider’s Web*, which was scheduled for release that year. They turned it down, saying the subject matter was too complex for their audiences and was unlikely to attract more than ten thousand viewers at best. *The Spider’s Web* was subsequently screened by broadcasters across the world, made available on leading passenger airlines, released on Netflix and Youtube, and has been watched by tens of millions of viewers worldwide. Setting aside the usual trolls, the feedback from viewers has generally been along the lines of “thank you for producing a documentary that gets to the heart of systemic problems with international finance while treating non-specialist viewers as intelligent human beings”.’

⁹⁰ Proposals for funding journalism along these lines date back to more than a decade and include Dan Hind, *The Return of the Public: Democracy Power and the Case for Media Reform*, London: Verso, 2010. Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, New York: The New Press, 2013.

⁹¹ We should not exaggerate how much public attitudes would have to change in this respect. As we discuss below, there is evidence that we already want to have more of a voice in decision-making in the media, e.g. Lee Edwards and Giles Moss, ‘Debating the Future of Public Service Broadcasting: Recommendations of an Online Citizens’ Assembly, Ofcom, 2020,

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-1-10-weeks/208895-future-of-psb/supporting-docs/psb-lse-citizens-assembly-report.pdf?v=367735>

⁹² Jason Clemens, and Steven Globerman, ‘New poll finds strong support for socialism in the UK’, Fraser Institute, 24 March 2023, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/commentary/new-poll-finds-strong-support-socialism-uk>. Even if there are grounds to be sceptical about any single poll, large majorities favour socialist policies such as nationalisation of key infrastructure (transport, energy, water). But this position rarely if ever features as the predominant or default view in conventional media deliberations. See YouGov, ‘Support for Nationalising Utilities and Public Transport has Grown Significantly in the Last Seven Years’, 18 July 2024, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50098-support-for-nationalising-utilities-and-public-transport-has-grown-significantly-in-last-seven-years>

⁹³ Some of the reasons for thinking this are set out in Faik Kurtulmuş and Jan Kandiyali, ‘Class and Inequality: Why the Media Fails the Poor and Why this Matters’ in Carl Fox, Joe Saunders (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Media Ethics*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2023. Interestingly the authors of that article note that a media voucher scheme might help provide a remedy.

⁹⁴ Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News: An Award-winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*, London: Chatto and Windus, 2008.

⁹⁵ James Madison, et al., *The Federalist Papers*, London: Penguin, 1987, p.124.

⁹⁶ John Skowronski, Donal Carlston, Lynda Mae, and Mathew Crawford, ‘Spontaneous Trait Transference: Communicators Take on the Qualities They Describe in Others’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol.74, No.4, 1998.

⁹⁷ Public speech here is to be interpreted broadly, and includes legislation and regulation.

⁹⁸ ‘The *Irish Times* View on Citizens’ Assemblies: out-sourcing political decisions’, *Irish Times*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-irish-times-view-on-citizens-assemblies-out-sourcing-political-decisions-1.3924889>

⁹⁹ Mark Warren and John Gastil, ‘Can Deliberative Mini-Publics Address the Cognitive Challenges of Democratic Citizenship?’, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol.77, No.2, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Edwards and Moss, ‘Debating the Future of Public Service Broadcasting: Recommendations of an Online Citizens’ Assembly’, Ofcom.

¹⁰¹ Michael Hannon, ‘Betting Democracy on Epistemology’, <https://philarchive.org/rec/HANBDO-4>. For a summary of some of this research, see Nicole Curato et al., ‘Twelve Key Findings in Deliberative Democracy Research’, *Daedalus*, Vol.14, No.3, 2017.

¹⁰² James Fishkin, *When the People Speak*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.147.

- ¹⁰³ Edwards and Moss, ‘Debating the Future of Public Service Broadcasting: Recommendations of an Online Citizens’ Assembly’, Ofcom, *emphasis added*.
- ¹⁰⁴ Eoin Carolan and Seána Glennon, ‘The Consensus Clarifying Role of Deliberative Mini-Publics in Constitutional Amendment: A Reply to Oran Doyle and Rachael Walsh’, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Vol.20, No.1, 2024, p.201.
- ¹⁰⁵ Private correspondence with the authors.
- ¹⁰⁶ Shao Ming Lee, ‘Empowered Mini-Publics: A Shortcut or Democratically Legitimate?’, *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, Vol.20, No.1, 2024, p.7.
- ¹⁰⁷ Lawrence LeDuc, Heather Bastedo, Catherine Baquero, ‘The Quiet Referendum: Why Electoral Reform Failed in Ontario, Presentation to the Canadian Political Science Association’, 2008, <https://www.rangevoting.org/LeDucEtAlOntarioFail2008.pdf>
- ¹⁰⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*. London: Penguin, 1992, p.363.
- ¹⁰⁹ Robin Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.27-8.
- ¹¹⁰ Josiah Ober, *Power and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens*, Princeton University Press, 2008, p.142.
- ¹¹¹ Ober, *Power and Knowledge*, p.156.
- ¹¹² Peter Stone, ‘The Political Potential of Sortition: A Study of the Random Selection of Citizens for Public Office’ (Review), *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.60, No.240, 2011, pp.664-6.
- ¹¹³ Oliver Dowlen, ‘Sorting out Sortition: A Perspective on the Random Selection of Political Officers’, *Political Studies*, Vol.57, 2009, pp.298-315.
- ¹¹⁴ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.40, *emphasis added*.
- ¹¹⁵ See Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Governments*. Princeton University Press, 2016. Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2016.
- ¹¹⁶ For proposals to use randomly selected bodies within the formal state apparatus , see Arash Abizadeh, ‘Representation, Bicameralism, Political Equality and Sortition: Reconstituting the Second Chamber as a Randomly Selected Assembly’, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2021, pp.791-806. Janosch Prinz and Manon Westphal, ‘The Tribunate as Realist Democratic Innovation’, *Political Theory*, Vol.52, No.1, 2024.
- ¹¹⁷ Cristina Lafont, *Democracy Without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2020. Kevin Elliott, *Democracy for Busy People*. Chicago University Press, 2023.
- ¹¹⁸ Warren and Gastil, ‘Can Deliberative Mini-Publics Address the Cognitive Challenges of Democratic Citizenship?’, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol.77, No.2, 2015, p.571.
- ¹¹⁹ Simone Chambers, ‘Human Life is Group Life: Deliberative Democracy for Realists’, *Critical Review*, Vol.30, No,1-2, 2018, p.40.

¹²⁰ For a discussion of ‘power with’, see Stephen Klein, ‘Democracy Requires Organized Collective Power’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol.30, No.3, 2021. Also relevant is the discussion of ‘potent collectivity’ in Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*, London: Pluto, 2014.

¹²¹ James Druckman and Kjersten Nelson, ‘Framing and Deliberation: How Citizens’ Conversations Limit Elite Influence’, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol.47, No.4, 2003, p.729.

¹²² Chambers, ‘Human Life is Group Life: Deliberative Democracy for Realists’, *Critical Review*, p.44.

¹²³ Rainer Forst, ‘Noumenal Power’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol.23, No.2, 2015, pp.111-127. In the same paper Forst notes that ‘The real site of power struggles, as all the great theoreticians (and practitioners) of power recognized, is the discursive realm – the realm where justifications are formed and reformed, questioned, tested, and possibly sealed off or reified.’

¹²⁴ Herbert Simon et al., ‘Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World’ in Martin Greenberger (ed.), *Computers, Communications and the Public Interest*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971, p.41.

¹²⁵ Richard Burnley, ‘Public funding principles for PSM. European Broadcasting Union’, 2017, https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/EBU-Legal-Focus-Pub-Fund_EN.pdf. Future of TV Inquiry, ‘A future for public service television: Content and platforms in a digital world’, 2016, p.34. <https://futureoftv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/FOTV-Report-Online-SP.pdf>. Georgina Born and Tony Prosser, ‘Culture and Consumerism: Citizenship, Public Service Broadcasting and the BBC’s Fair Trading Obligations’, *The Modern Law Review*, Vol.61, No.5, 2001, pp.657-687.

¹²⁶ House of Lords Communications Committee, ‘Licence to change: BBC future funding’, 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23091/documents/169130/default/>. Voice of the Listener and Viewer, ‘VLV Proposes Licence Fee Body’, 2015, <https://vlv.org.uk/news/vlv-proposes-licence-fee-body/>

¹²⁷ We have used the electoral register to estimate the likely upper limit of registered post-2027 BBC members. The actual number who register to participate would doubtless be somewhat different.

¹²⁸ Survey of the BBC website’s news content: www.bbc.co.uk.

¹²⁹ These local panels will also have responsibilities to assess cultural and educational content from the BBC and elsewhere: see below.

¹³⁰ Jo Henderson, ‘Let the People Speak - The Community Programmes Unit 1972-2002’, *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol.17, No.1, 2022.

¹³¹ If other media uncover important information, the panels should be in a position to say as much. And if these other media publish disinformation or behave irresponsibly, the panels should be able to say so.

¹³² Maggie Brown and Jason Deans, ‘Robert Peston: BBC follows the Daily Mail’s lead too much’, *Guardian*, 6 June 2014. See also Lewis, ‘Newspapers, not the BBC, led the way in biased election coverage’ *The Conversation*, 15 May 2015 and Cushion et al, ‘Newspapers, impartiality and television news: Intermedia agenda-setting during the 2015 UK General Election campaign’, *Journalism Studies*.

¹³³ National Audit Office, ‘Departmental Overview 2022-3, 2023’, <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/BBC-DO-2022-23.pdf>

¹³⁴ Tara Conlan, ‘BBC spent 34m on taxi fares in past three years’, *Guardian*, 20 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/feb/20/bbc-spent-34m-on-taxi-fares-in-past-three-years>

¹³⁵ Voice of the Listener and Viewer, ‘38% Cut in BBC Funding: VLV Analysis’, 21 October 2024, <https://vlv.org.uk/news/bbc-public-funding-analysis/>

¹³⁶ We have even not tried to calculate the efficiency gains and other economic benefits that a mutualised BBC will deliver. Readers might like to ask themselves what kinds of things such an institution might be able to do more efficiently, and how its operations might benefit the public and the private sectors.

¹³⁷ BBC, ‘BBC Education’, undated, <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/whatwedo/publicservices/learning>

¹³⁸ In terms of broadcast hours there is probably now less engagement with university teaching as such than when BBC2's late night output was produced in partnership with the Open University. Given the ease with which lectures and seminars can be recorded and distributed digitally this would seem to be a candidate for some modest extra investment.

¹³⁹ The idea that an institution might benefit from organisations in the rest of society that reproduce its governing principles is discussed in P.J. Rhodes, *Ancient Democracy and Modern Ideology*. London: Duckworth, 2003.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Shakespeare on the Estate’, 1994, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/shakespeare/search/index.php/title/av36530>

¹⁴¹ There is a lively discussion, much of it conducted on Roger Bolton’s Beebwatch podcast, about the future of the creative sector in the UK. This lies beyond the scope of this paper, but a BBC mutualised along the lines proposed would be well placed to coordinate with any new institutions and funding mechanisms that emerge. <https://podfollow.com/beebwatch/view>

¹⁴² The temporary panels created by subscription will provide valuable cues regarding areas that the public require greater scrutiny.

¹⁴³ <https://newpublic.org/psi>

¹⁴⁴ Doctorow, ‘“Enshittification” is coming for absolutely everything’, *Financial Times*, 7 February 2024.

¹⁴⁵ Dan Hind, ‘The British Digital Cooperative: A New Model Public Sector Institution. Next System Project’, 2019, <https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/the-british-digital-cooperative-a-new-model-public-sector-institution>