



RENEWING THE BBC



A NEW CHARTER FOR BRITAIN AND THE WORLD

The British Broadcasting Challenge is an independent group of media experts, academics and producers committed to the survival and strengthening of public service broadcasting in Britain.

We believe the BBC must emerge from Charter Review as a renewed force, able to speak with and to the nation and the world, and act as a bulwark of democratic resilience in a volatile and dangerous world.

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A VISION FOR THE BBC'S NEXT CHARTER

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

Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize lecture, 2021

The BBC is one of Britain's greatest institutions. For over a century, it has informed, educated and entertained, serving as a platform for the UK's myriad identities and cultures whilst exercising soft power globally in defence of truth and integrity.

British democracy faces an unprecedented information crisis. From AI-generated deepfakes to hostile state propaganda, from the collapse of local journalism to algorithms that amplify division, the foundations of informed democratic debate are under assault across the globe. We have witnessed the power some of the wealthiest individuals on the planet can exert on democracies through their ownership of social media and information platforms.

Here, the threats to British public life run deeper than disinformation alone. Social cohesion is fracturing and local journalism is collapsing, leaving institutions without accountability and communities without shared stories. The financial muscle of global streaming giants means that British creativity struggles for investment and reach. The BBC is uniquely placed to address these challenges, and the current Charter Review presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild it for the future. Under a government that recognises public service broadcasting's value, we can grasp the opportunity for bold reform that positions the BBC as both Britain's cultural champion and democratic bulwark.

Given these stakes, and technological and behavioural changes, simply rolling over the current charter and TV Licence model unchanged is not a viable option. So we welcome the Culture Secretary's speech to the Royal Television Society in which she framed charter renewal as an *"opportunity to futureproof the BBC so it thrives not just for the next decade but well into the next century"*.

We are further encouraged by the Government's statement in its Creative Industries Sector Plan that *'The BBC continues to hold a uniquely important role as a cornerstone of the whole of the UK's creative economy'*. We agree, but bold, decisive action is required to ensure that the BBC emerges from Charter Review as a renewed force, sustaining and protecting British cultural, creative and democratic life.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

A BBC FUNDED FAIRLY AND AT SCALE

- The nature of BBC funding and its level should be subject to independent assessment rooted in three principles which:
 1. enable universal access to all BBC content
 2. remedy the impact of previous cuts
 3. take account of income inequality

INDEPENDENCE, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- A Permanent Charter establishing the BBC's right to exist in perpetuity, with core principles protected from political interference
- Ten-year reviews of Agreements between the BBC and government for operational matters
- A new and independent body with responsibility for making appointments to a governing board, with Charter-specified criteria for regional representation and essential expertise
- Citizen assemblies to increase accountability and engagement with the public

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

- Formal Charter designation of countering disinformation as core public purpose
- Recognition of the BBC as vital national infrastructure for information security, essential to UK critical resilience, with appropriate funding and legal protections
- Sustained funding increases for BBC World Service to enable global leadership in information resilience and soft power
- International partnerships with allied public service broadcasters for coordinated response to transnational disinformation threats



UNIVERSALITY

- Government to ensure that universal access is safeguarded as DTT is phased out
- Strengthened BBC commitment to providing local news on TV and radio, not just online
- BBC to maintain news in prominent positions in its broadcast schedules and strengthen domestic and international current affairs reportage,
- BBC to develop its News app to ensure that reliable journalism reaches the widest possible audiences
- The BBC to maintain production and decision-making centres in all parts of the UK

A GLOBAL BBC

- Whole-hearted government support for the BBC's editorial independence, domestically and internationally
- Well-directed government investment to support both bbc.com and the World Service
- BBC to take a global lead in partnerships between trustworthy information providers to strengthen critical resilience at home and abroad

VALUES-LED TECHNOLOGY

- BBC to be tasked with maintaining and expanding its R&D capabilities so that the digital transformation works in the public interest
- Government to ensure that the BBC receives sufficient funding to fulfil its role as a technological innovator

A BBC FUNDED FAIRLY AND AT SCALE

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

Yet the BBC now faces its gravest financial crisis since its founding. A six-year licence fee freeze, combined with soaring inflation, has delivered real-terms cuts of over 30% since 2010.

A well-resourced BBC benefits the UK economically as well as culturally, providing investment for the creative economy and sustaining over 50,000 jobs in the nations and regions. As the late Tessa Jowell once said, the BBC licence fee is Britain's venture capital for the creative industries. This includes creative and technical training needed to equip us for the 'fourth industrial revolution'.

Resources must be adequate to fulfil the BBC's Charter purposes with sustained, guaranteed income that keeps pace with inflation. There must be no repeat of the 30% cuts inflicted since 2010 without public debate.

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

Simply maintaining the current TV Licence model unchanged is not a viable option given technological and behavioural changes.

We oppose funding the domestic BBC from direct taxation, which would leave it vulnerable to sustained government interference and undermine its independence. Funding the BBC through advertising must also be rejected because of its impact on the UK's broader commercial PSB ecosystem.

However, we recognise that the current TV Licence model needs updating for the multi-platform age, and there are strong arguments for a more progressive funding structure that better addresses income inequality. We would therefore support a reformed system, such as a household-based BBC or audiovisual levy, that maintains universality whilst making some allowance for those on the lowest incomes. This system should be overseen, and its levels set, by a fully independent body, removing political pressure from any future funding settlements.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

INDEPENDENCE, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The BBC is a national, not a state broadcaster, and it must be insulated from direct political influence and control by governments as well as partisan interest groups. The current governance system leaves the BBC chronically vulnerable to political pressure through Charter renewals, funding decisions, and partisan appointments to the Unitary Board (including the Chair). Each of these needs reform.

The BBC derives its constitutional status from a Royal Charter which states that *'the BBC is operationally and editorially independent of government'*. But its periodic reviews (currently 11 years, previously either 10 or 15 years) have often been used by incumbent governments to threaten the BBC's structure, role and function. These existential questions have a debilitating and often chilling effect and undermine the perception, if not the reality, of complete editorial independence.

We believe a permanent Charter is now essential, establishing the BBC in perpetuity and enshrining its independence. This would remove existential uncertainty, eliminate Charter and mid-term reviews as political weapons, and enable long term strategic investment and editorial decision making without fear of political retaliation.

The Charter would establish core principles - independence, universality, a public service mission - that cannot be altered by temporary political majorities. To ensure that the BBC remains relevant and accountable to Parliament and to licence payers, the Charter should continue to be complemented - as now - by an Agreement with the Secretary of State that sets the parameters for BBC services and priorities. This should run for 10 years in the first instance.

The current BBC Unitary Board combines oversight and management functions which confuses the British public and exposes the Chair to inappropriate involvement in day-to-day management. Individual board appointments have been politicised, with the Chair and four Board members appointed directly by government, regardless of relevant expertise.

We propose a new BBC Governance Board, of no more than 12 members, appointed by a new and wholly independent appointments body. The Charter should specify requirements for regional representation and essential expertise areas, to ensure governors possess the skills needed for effective oversight.

Independent appointment processes would restore public confidence in the BBC's governance, whilst democratic accountability would continue, as now, through parliamentary scrutiny. All Board nominees should appear before the DCMS Select Committee.

This BBC Governance Board would have ultimate accountability for regulating the BBC's editorial performance and strategic direction. This creates clear separation from the BBC Management Board, chaired by the Director General, who will be responsible for the day-to-day leadership and management of the corporation.

As the new Governance Board would be responsible for holding BBC management to account for editorial and strategy delivery, Ofcom would lose this role but would continue to oversee market impact assessments involving new services or significant changes to existing services.

Whilst parliamentary mechanisms provide some accountability through elected representatives, the BBC needs to find new ways of engaging more directly with the public. Mutualisation has been proposed as an option but would render the BBC vulnerable to takeover from commercial or partisan interests or a combination of both.

As a more practical alternative, regular, representative Citizens' Assemblies, could provide a forum to explore audience priorities and attitudes, and allow for constructive discussion of long-term strategic thinking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A Permanent Charter establishing the BBC's right to exist in perpetuity, with core principles protected from political interference
 - Ten-year reviews of Agreements between the BBC and government for operational matters
 - A new and independent body with responsibility for making appointments to a governing board, with Charter-specified criteria for regional representation and essential expertise
 - Citizen assemblies to increase accountability and engagement with the public
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COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

The BBC is trusted more than any other news source and is recognised for its editorial integrity and long-standing commitment to accurate and impartial reporting. It plays a critical role in upholding democracy, in the UK and globally.

The current information ecosystem is now dangerously polluted. False information has been weaponised to destabilise democracies, support autocracies, undermine collective action for the public good, and increasingly divide and polarise communities. AI-generated disinformation has emerged as a critical threat, exploiting genuine content for malicious purposes and creating deepfakes that are increasingly indistinguishable from reality.

Disinformation is no longer just a communications issue - it is a matter of epistemic national security and civic resilience. With its unmatched verification capabilities and institutional commitment to truth, the BBC is uniquely positioned to serve as Britain's frontline defence against these threats, if it is given the necessary powers and resources. It should therefore be recognised as part of the UK's critical national infrastructure, and countering disinformation should be one of its core public purposes in the next Charter.

The BBC World Service requires particular investment to fulfil this information security role globally. As one of Britain's most effective tools for projecting democratic values and countering authoritarian propaganda, it deserves recognition as a strategic national asset worthy of sustained funding even during a time of economic constraints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Formal Charter designation of countering disinformation as core public purpose
 - Recognition as vital national infrastructure for information security, essential to UK critical resilience with appropriate funding and legal protections
 - Sustained funding increases for BBC World Service enabling global leadership in information defence and soft power
 - International partnerships with allied public service broadcasters for coordinated response to transnational disinformation threats
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UNIVERSALITY

Universality is a foundational principle of the BBC and remains the social glue which binds the nation together. But this principle faces unprecedented challenges as audiences fragment across platforms, and algorithms create personalised information bubbles that undermine shared national conversations.

A deep commitment to universality ensures that the BBC remains a place where the nations, regions and communities of the UK are properly reflected back to each other, and then collectively shared with the rest of the world. The principle of 'something of quality for everyone' becomes even more vital as growing amounts of news, sport and entertainment move behind paywalls to streaming and subscription services, creating a two-tier media landscape that excludes those who cannot afford multiple subscriptions.

The BBC must make programmes with specifically British content and context - whether news and current affairs, soaps, comedy, music, drama, or children's television. It must also recognise that many vulnerable and low-income people do not have reliable access to high-speed broadband and will continue to rely on free over-the-air transmission for the foreseeable future. As the country moves towards DTT switch off, the government must ensure that free-to-watch universal access is not compromised by broadband affordability, inadequate download speeds, or lack of digital skills.

It is essential that the BBC delivers content attractive to large, mass audiences such as *Strictly*, *EastEnders*, *Match of the Day*, and *Blue Planet* if it is to stay at the heart of national life. But it must also embrace content that speaks to minority and niche audiences, which the market is less likely to provide. That means single dramas, creative risk-taking, and challenging work from authorial writers and directors. It means women's and disabled sport as well as traditional male sports. It means investing in local reporting which reinforces communities, provides accountability, and counters inaccurate and malign information.

The growth of partisan opinion channels masquerading as 'news' makes the BBC's commitment to universal access to quality, fact-based journalism more



important than ever. As more people retreat into social media echo chambers, it is essential that everyone has access to free, trustworthy, accurate and impartial information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government must ensure that universal access is not compromised by broadband costs or digital exclusion as DTT is phased out
- The BBC must strengthen its commitment to providing genuinely local news on TV and radio as well as online
- The BBC must maintain news in prominent positions in its broadcast schedules, strengthen support for domestic and international current affairs reportage, and better integrate World Service knowledge into UK reporting
- The BBC should aspire to make its News app the equivalent of the iPlayer, ensuring trusted journalism reaches audiences on their preferred platforms
- The BBC needs production and decision-making centres in all parts of the UK, with producers and commissioners drawn from the widest possible range of backgrounds and truly representative of UK audiences

A GLOBAL BBC

Britain faces an international information war. Hostile state actors spend hundreds of millions targeting Western democracies with sophisticated propaganda operations. Russia's RT and China's state media networks flood global audiences with authoritarian messaging, whilst American tech moguls use their platforms to directly try to influence our politics. Meanwhile, democratic voices struggle for reach and resources, as our information supply chains are being disrupted and are dangerously vulnerable to cyber attacks.

The BBC World Service stands as Britain's most effective response to these threats. With nearly 500 million weekly users and unique editorial independence widely recognised internationally, it represents unmatched soft power projection. Moreover, the profound international understanding built up by the World Service and BBC Monitoring informs the entire range of the BBC's domestic and international output. Yet they face chronic underfunding that undermines their strategic effectiveness precisely when Britain needs maximum global influence.

Ministers across government must recognise BBC World Service as a strategic asset worthy of sustained investment, especially since the US Government has withdrawn support for Voice of America. Without adequate resources, we risk ceding global information leadership to authoritarian competitors at the moment of greatest strategic need. The biggest global challenges - from climate change to pandemic response - require international collaboration that only trusted news organisations can properly provide at scale.

Some have argued that traditional radio has become less important as people increasingly rely on social media for information but during a humanitarian crisis or in a war zone access to the internet is difficult to non-existent. The World Service should continue to try to find new ways to broaden its reach but policymakers must bear in mind that relying on internet platforms brings its own dangers as the algorithms on commercial platforms prioritise controversial content over factual information.

There is also a global market for screen content and formats where the UK

excels, with the BBC at its centre as a hub for creativity, training and innovation. This, through commercial subsidiary BBC Studios, contributes to Britain's cultural influence abroad and economic prosperity at home. The tax environment which has led the UK to become a global drama production centre must be protected.

The BBC should take global leadership in building alliances between democratic public service broadcasters, sharing verification resources and coordinated responses to transnational disinformation campaigns. This positions Britain at the centre of international efforts to defend democratic information whilst strengthening our own resilience against foreign interference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There must be whole-hearted government support for the BBC's editorial independence, domestically and internationally. This must include well-directed investment to support both [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com) and the World Service
- The BBC should take a global lead in partnerships between trustworthy information providers
- The government needs to recognise that our public interest is global, not just national, and develop joined-up policy across information, digital security and citizenship
- The UK should develop a new vision for the architecture of information by acting in collaboration with other democracies to strengthen critical resilience at home and abroad

VALUES-LED TECHNOLOGY

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

the BBC ensures that the entire broadcast network is accountable and answerable to every citizen, whether they pay the licence fee themselves or not, and regardless of their consumption. This was recognised as a public purpose in the 2007 Charter, tasking the BBC with "delivering to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services".

The internet fundamentally changed this relationship. It is a ubiquitous medium and communications network that the BBC does not control, and to which it cannot guarantee access for citizens. Commercial platform providers prioritise engagement and profit over public value, using surveillance capitalism business models that treat citizens as products to be sold to advertisers. Their algorithmic systems amplify division and misinformation because controversy drives engagement, whilst their opaque content moderation serves corporate interests rather than democratic discourse.

The means by which the BBC reaches its audiences are in urgent need of reinvention to ensure that it remains always accessible by, and accountable to, the UK public. Any discussion of the BBC's future remit must acknowledge the core function that R&D plays in delivering the BBC's public purposes, embracing and developing new technologies to reach audiences today and tomorrow.

The BBC's innovations must be explicitly owned by the public, open source and free for others to build upon – and at the heart of these innovations must be respect for individuals' data and privacy. More than a decade ago, Mark Thompson advocated for the development of a digital public space, as a vital

evolution of the physical public spaces that are so fundamental for a society. That vision is now essential.

The BBC must be empowered to address the failures of digital networks which no longer prioritise the needs of the UK public, creating technological infrastructure that serves democracy rather than profit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The BBC should be once again tasked with developing public-centred technologies, with increased R&D funding to match the scale of digital transformation challenges
- The BBC should maintain and expand research capabilities, ensuring all licence fee-funded innovations are explicitly owned by the public and open source, with respect for individuals' data and privacy at the heart of all technological development
- The BBC should lead creation of an independent, free and universal Public Service Network, providing dedicated internet bandwidth for trusted public service content, setting standards for reliability, privacy, accessibility, accountability and universality
- The BBC should champion algorithmic transparency, public service content prominence, and user rights protection across all digital platforms
- The BBC should collaborate with other public service broadcasters and democratic institutions on technology standards and innovation, positioning Britain as a global pioneer in values-led technology

WHO WE ARE



The **British Broadcasting Challenge** is an independent group of media experts, academics and producers committed to the survival and strengthening of public service broadcasting in Britain.

We have two aims:

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

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

This was signed by a wide range of more than 120 public figures from the arts, science, literature, security services and civil society.

Steering Group members: Pat Younge (chair), Professor Steven Barnett, Rosaleen Hughes, Lindsay Mackie, Professor Jean Seaton, Chris Waiting