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You, me, the BBC and the license fee

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# YOU, ME, THE BBC AND THE LICENSE FEE






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### Abstract:

*This article lays out some of the critical issues about the future of the BBC and public service broadcasting that will be discussed in the mid-term Charter Review starting April 2022. A theme that will be central is the future funding arrangements, with the intention to abolish the license fee already announced by the government minister responsible for the review. The challenge is to ensure that any alternative to license fee funding supports a richer and more relevant public service broadcasting sector.*

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It is apparent that, as it celebrates its centenary, the BBC in its entirety—as an institution, as a global and domestic service provider, and news outlet—divides opinion. The broadcaster is accused of political bias from both the Left and the Right. Although such complaints have long existed, they are now more complicated and febrile as the political lines of the home nations of United Kingdom have realigned. In recent years, the BBC has been accused of being pro-Remain, and by others of giving the largest platform to unelected Brexiteers; from smearing Labour leaders to being a socialist outpost; and now, from not holding Boris Johnson to account to giving too much coverage to parties in No 10. However, the tendency for these arguments to centre on the license fee, precludes an essential debate about the function of 21st century public service broadcasting. This debate needs to include a far wider discussion about a reconfiguration of public service media and its funding mechanism, as well an idea that is presented in ‘The BBC and Beyond’ manifesto, that has been submitted to the mid-term Charter review which begins in April 2022.

In the current climate, the BBC and public service broadcasting are under threat. The ideological underpinning and rationale for the BBC and a strong public service sector has been eroded by the values of neoliberal conservatism that have also allowed a multiplicity of alternative ‘news sources’ to flourish in an unregulated environment. Channel 4, the commercially funded public service broadcaster is in danger of being privatised, and

the BBC license fee is constrained to a rate substantially below inflation, whilst approaching the mid-term Charter review that includes future funding arrangements.

That the preferred position of the Conservative government is to change the funding model of the BBC was made explicit in a recent tweet by Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries (2022), who announced the end of the license fee prior to the start of the mid-term review. Whatever decision is made about the license fee or how it is levied, there is still an urgent need for radical media reform and more effective regulation, to respond to misinformation, multiple providers and the prevalence of anonymous or fabricated sources. Other issues with the BBC in its current formation are the continued under- or misrepresentation of many communities and groups and some individuals, the gender pay gap, and the legacy of a culture that has allowed abusive behaviour to continue unchallenged. As well as addressing all the above (!), a pressing issue for the BBC is the mid-term Charter Review April 2022. What follows is a contextualisation of five of the major concerns that the BBC needs to address for the mid-term Charter review. These are the governance and management of the organisation, the license fee structure, the relevance of its output, and technology.

### Governance and Management

The British Broadcasting Company was formed in 1922 as a commercial conglomeration of radio manufacturers who were granted a national



monopoly license to broadcast. The Managing Director, John Reith proposed a public service broadcast system to be offered by the British Broadcasting Corporation that came into being on January 1st, 1927. Since then, the BBC has been financed by a license fee set by the government, under the auspices of a Royal Charter established to ensure independence from government (Briggs, 1961). The Charter is renewed every ten years and now runs alongside the 'across the sector' agreements established by the regulator, the Office of Communications (Ofcom), mediated by the BBC Governors (BBC, Governance).

The BBC Board has three staff roles, the Director-General, the Chief Operating Officer and the Head of Content. Two of those positions are occupied by women. There are 4 executive positions, including the Director General, currently Tim Davie, the others are invited by the Queen, via recommendations from ministers. The 10 non-execs come through an application procedure, and should include governors for the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, although dishearteningly latter post is vacant. The nine (three women, six men) non-staff board members originate from a narrow range of backgrounds, broadcasting, academia, culture and most frequently and anachronistically as well as inappropriately for a public service broadcaster, is finance, with four of the non-staff members, including the Chair, from backgrounds in the City. Between them, the members of the Board have accrued the honours of a Professor Dame, a Professor CBE, a Sir with a CH suffix (Member of the Companions of Honour) and two further Sirs. The most recent appointments, who took up their posts on January 1st, 2022, are both men of colour with backgrounds in finance, one is a Sir and the other sits on the Panel of Senior Advisers for Chatham House, the Royal Institute for International Affairs (BBC, BBC Board).

There are many issues with the BBC—not least it still needs to become 'overseen' by a far more representative range of the population than this list of eminences suggests. This is further compounded by the over-representation of public school men and the elite-university educated in the upper tiers of the BBC and what is increasingly often seen as an overly, or indeed overtly cosy relationship between politicians and political journalists, which has led to a revolving door, where BBC journalists become government media advisors and spokespeople. These include the now-disgraced Allegra Stratton, one-time political editor of *Newsnight*, and extend to Guto Harri, BBC chief political correspondent (2002–2005) and now Director of Communications at No.10 (February 2022–?). In some cases, people then return to positions of power in the BBC such as Sir Robbie Gibb, an ex-editor of *BBC Westminster*, who became Director of Communications at No.10 (2017–2019) and now sits on the BBC board. Many of the concerns about the news agenda relate to the stories that are covered (or not covered) and the ways in which they are framed, and follow on from the decisions that are made by or reported on by people far removed from the realities faced by so many.

#### License Fee

The abolition of the license fee was one of outcomes that was expected to emerge from the Peacock Committee, and its report in 1986 acknowledged that although it was a far from a perfect solution, in the absence of a realistic alternative, the license fee remained (Seaton and McNicholas, 2009). It seems that only a paucity of creative thinking would come to the same conclusion 36 years later.

As it stands, there are four central objections to the license fee. The first is that those who support free-market media identify the license fee as a

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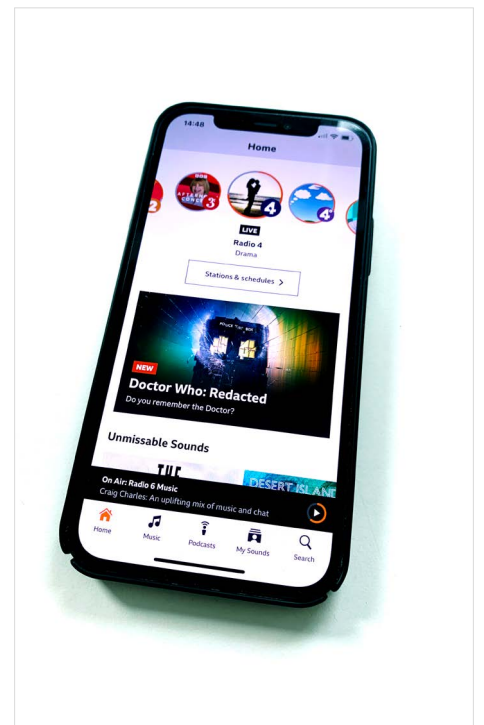
*The BBC World Service, a 24-hour radio station that attracts a weekly audience of 473 million and produces a substantial amount of content in over 40 languages*



public subsidy that grants a substantial competitive advantage to the BBC, a global media company with a successful commercial arm (a point that will be returned to). The second has supporters on both the Left and the Right: that a license fee per household unfairly burdens single-person households. The third objection is that people with limited digital access are paying for content that they cannot access. The final one is the common association of the license fee with the older technology of television, which no longer accounts for the vast majority of BBC output. For example, on 4th February 2022, the nine national BBC television channels transmitted a total of 183 hours of content. When you include the television content of the devolved nations (BBC Scotland, ALBA and S4C), and the output of the 11 national radio stations, five nation stations that cover Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales including alternative language output, and 40 local radio stations, a further 1324 hours of BBC content was broadcast, taking the total broadcast hours to 1507 in a 24-hour day<sup>1</sup>. In addition, assuming you have digital access, there is the substantial online provision of [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), 'one of the most extensive and most frequently visited news websites' that provides national and local information (Barwise and York, 2020, p.30). BBC iPlayer provides access to live, time-shifted, exclusive and archival content—currently 2500 programmes (Zdraveska, 2022) and Sounds does the same for radio and podcasts. In addition, BBC Films makes a substantial contribution to the UK film industry by buying first broadcast rights, Radio 1 and 1Xtra have specific provisions to nurture, promote and grow emerging UK musical talent. All of this contributes to the success and vibrancy of the UK creative sectors and their global reputation. It is simply no longer feasible for the license fee to be levied solely on television; what also needs to be considered is whether it is appropriate that

such an extensive contribution to public service media be made by a single organisation, particularly one dealing with the many issues listed above.

As well as the domestic services, the BBC has an international reach from the days of the Empire Service (1932–65), now the BBC World Service, a 24-hour radio station that attracts a weekly audience of 473 million and produces a substantial amount of content in over 40 languages for a wide range of national and local audiences (BBC, 2019). There is also the advantage of a shared language and many cultural references with Australia and the US, where the BBC sells broadcast rights to high-profile programmes such as *Dr Who* (BBC1 1963–89, BBC1 2005–present), and royal and sporting events such as tennis from Wimbledon, that the broadcaster has covered since 1927. More mundane programming attracts a different audience, such as the long-standing format *Antiques Roadshow* (BBC1 1979–present) which is very popular in the US where the original airs as a programme on the PBS channel, alongside an American version of the format produced by WGBH (a Boston-based PBS). The popular formats of *MasterMind* (1972–present) and *MasterChef* (BBC 1990–present) and their celebrity spin offs are currently produced in 29 of the 60 countries to which they have been licensed. More recently, there are partnerships with SVOD services such as Netflix, Amazon and Apple, and other national public service broadcasters, as well as an extended partnership between BBC Studios and Discovery (Harrington and MacIntosh, 2019). These sales and partnerships contribute to the commercial profile of the BBC as a global entity, and to the complaints of an unfair public subsidy.



<sup>1</sup> All Information BBC iPlayer schedules 4 February 2022



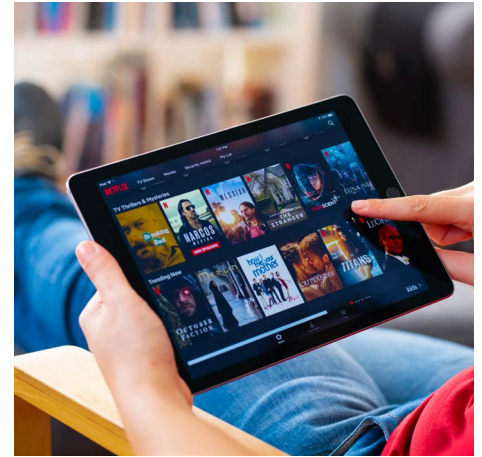
### Relevance

Another area of conflicting concerns for the BBC at the mid-term review is how it can demonstrate its relevance to audiences, as well as its contribution to the cultural economy. Surveys commissioned by the BBC suggest that 99% of households access some BBC services (BBC, 2019). The proviso is that 99% of the self-selecting households are prepared to fill in a survey about the BBC, and the same applies to the claim that 91% of individuals use one or more of the BBC's services in the average week (Barwise and York, 2020). There needs to be a better mechanism for measuring the relevance of content, and there are associated difficulties; the BBC is required by Ofcom to transmit a minimum quota of 25% content from independent production companies. In 2018, 32% of content (BBC, 2019), was from the independent production companies which also produce content for the commercially funded terrestrial channels. This arrangement contributes to the wider production economy of the broadcast sector, but reduces the consistency of programmes, of channel identities and of the domestic brand. Distinctions between BBC and independent content are not always clear, arguably only identified by the absence of ad breaks. It may not be apparent to audience members that they are engaging with BBC content, particularly as trailers and channel idents disrupt the content in the same that adverts do. The availability of free (YouTube) or SVOD (Netflix) services, has further fragmented the audience, and BBC content too often fails to engage young(er) audiences in ways they find interesting or easy to navigate. The economically driven shift to an exclusively online delivery for BBC3 was misguided, particularly as the online channel was used to showcase content that was potentially too risqué for the broadcast channels, but more relevant and appropriate to the older segment of the channel's

target audience (16–34). The re-launch of BBC3 as a terrestrial broadcaster (February 1st, 2022) was surely an opportunity to do something a little more invigorating than six back-to-back episodes of *Eating with My Ex* on its first Friday night back on the telly.

There has been a loss of connection between an audience from four nations and a national broadcaster that privileges one. Historically, the nation was brought together in through the regular broadcast of the events, that came to make up the broadcast calendar that it invented (Scannell, 1989). These include the Boat Race, the Grand National, FA Cup Final, the Derby, Trooping of the Colour, Wimbledon, the Proms, Remembrance Day Service, the Christmas message from the monarch. These events are punctuated by the royal occasions, marriages, deaths, investitures, and jubilee celebrations. For some, these elements are still central to their experience, for others they make no sense. For many the narrative imagined for a nation a century ago, arguably no longer has any relevance. We also watch differently now, not necessarily in a linear fashion, and access is available without regard to the transmission schedule. The notion of a shared routine created by the ordinary familiarity of soap operas, to the extraordinary events of the broadcast calendar, has diminished through time-shifting and on-demand access. However, the slowness of the Corporation to respond to the generational and demographic shifts has left many feeling under-represented and under-served (Barwise and York, 2020).

It may be, however, that when the turbulent years of Brexit and the pandemic settle down, some of the moments we will remember are tuning into BBC Parliament to watch live coverage of Brexit votes, or our ability to access data about COVID cases with our postcodes on the BBC website. For others, the educational resources provided during the pandemic helped with the stress of home-



*We also watch differently now, not necessarily in a linear fashion, and access is available without regard to the transmission schedule. The notion of a shared routine has diminished through time-shifting and on-demand access*

schooling, and CBBC provided distraction for younger school-age children, or perhaps in phases of insomnia people discovered the soothing sounds that play throughout the night on CBeebies Radio. The circumstances of the pandemic may do much to demonstrate the public service role of the BBC in a period of great uncertainty and of financial or emotional hardship, but clear plans to support that role of public service and ensure its continued relevance to its future audience remain essential. Growing trust in or appreciation of the BBC may already be demonstrated the most recent parliamentary petition 'to hold a binding referendum on the future of the BBC TV license'. This closed on December 1st, 2021, having attracted only 15,899 of the 100,000 signatures needed to force a debate, despite having been open for more than 6 months (Petitions UK Government and Parliament, 2021a). The previous petition 'Abolish the license fee' closed on 21st May 2021 having gathered 5994 signatures (Petitions UK Government and Parliament, 2021b). And the one prior to that 'Revoke the License fee' 4th September 2020, achieved 110,842 signatures which led to a pointless debate which reiterated that the license fee was enshrined by the Royal Charter until the date of its next review (Petitions UK Government and Parliament, 2020).

Another important part of the BBC's contribution has been the development of new technologies and techniques, a regulatory requirement, that is often clouded or squeezed out by discussions about content, but should not go unrecognised



### Technology

Another important part of the BBC's contribution has been the development of new technologies and techniques, a regulatory requirement, that is often clouded or squeezed out by discussions about content, but should not go unrecognised. Not only is it the world's first national public service broadcaster (1927), the world's first international broadcaster (Empire Service 1932), it also established the first national television service (1936). The coverage of the Coronation of George VI (1936) has been identified as the first global media event (Dayan and Katz, 1992). The Coronation of his daughter, Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 did the same for television (Scannell, 1989). Behind the scenes, the Corporation developed its own video technology VERA—Vision Electronic Recording Apparatus (1947), introduced the first national colour television service (1964) and invented the 'instant replay' for the 1966 World Cup (Nash, 1970). The structure of public service broadcasting has been influenced by the introduction of the 'broadcaster as publisher' model, later adopted by Channel 4, but first used in the BBC2 Community Programmes Unit (CPU), a participatory project initiated by David Attenborough in 1972, when he was Controller of BBC2. It emerged in response to an extended media debate about the role and function of public service broadcasting prior to the Annan Committee report (1977). The CPU gave the Corporation a mechanism for responding to concerns about public service broadcasting. Importantly, it also provided the BBC with ways to develop experimental forms of content, a central part of BBC2's remit that was difficult to achieve in the, then, 'closed-shop' (fully unionised) environment of the television studio. Broadcasting, like many other industries, in the early 1970s, was a fraught time, as unions sought to protect the rights of their members that were being eroded.



By developing a production context beyond or external to union agreements, the CPU enabled 'ordinary people' or non-media professionals, usually pre-existing groups, to apply to the Unit for access to the means of production and distribution, in order, to express their frequently unrepresented point of view in a variety of formats. Not only did this contribute to a reconfiguration of the broadcasting sector, but it also introduced many of the themes and techniques we are now familiar with. This is most apparent in the output of *Video Diaries* (BBC2 1990–94) and its offspring *Teenage Video Diaries* (BBC2 1994–97), strands that introduced the first-person documentary to television screens (Henderson, 2009). Such experimentation continued with the *Video Nation* (BBC2 1994–2000, BBC Online 2000–11) project that supported a small group of volunteers, selected from 3000 applicants, to document their lives in two-minute vignettes, broadcast on weeknights, immediately after the late evening news. Whilst fleeting and ephemeral as television content, many

of the shorts were remarkable glimpses into real lives, that disrupted or 'punctured' the stream of high production value content, or 'flow of television' (Williams, 1992). Shorts were often presented in first-person address to camera in extreme close-up from a lowly lit, intimate domestic environment—techniques that are now familiar from reality tv and online vlogs (video blogs) and performances, but were unusual and memorable televisual techniques at that time. Video Nation relaunched in 2000 as the first archival project on the BBC website (Henderson, 2009). The growth of online services followed to facilitate the digital switchover and offer a trusted provider. The launch of iPlayer and Sounds and the ability to access live, time-shifted and archival content are examples of the role 'a strong, independent, publicly funded BBC might play in a post-broadcasting future, to present opportunities for much more authentically democratic arrangements than were possible when radical media reform was last on the agenda in the 1970s' (Mills, 2016, p.217).



*The need for widespread media reform and regulation has never been greater and it needs to be built around a strong public service broadcast sector across radio, television and online provision*

## Conclusion

The need for widespread media reform and regulation has never been greater and it needs to be built around a strong public service broadcast sector across radio, television and online provision. Perhaps, rather than celebrating the centenary of the commercial iteration of the BBC in 2022, we should spend the next five years finding ways to ensure that the concept of public service broadcasting will achieve its centenary in 2027 as part of a far more effective public service media to redress the slippage between the nation that is represented and the lives we live. A reimagined BBC should surely retain a central role, whilst relinquishing some of its transmission hours to alternative media producers and not just independent production companies. As identified earlier, in 2018, the BBC transmitted 32% of content from the independent production companies, although they are regulated to transmit 25%. This 7% over-reach on the independent quota, could become a space for campaigning and community groups, members of the public, and students to produce content, revisiting the aims of the CPU, but enhanced by advances in technology and digital literacies, and the relative ease of access to the means of production. Many universities, including UWL, have broadcast-quality production facilities and our media and journalism students produce broadcast-quality work that raises important issues and has a social and public value. Such an arrangement would ensure that the voices and experiences of a far wider range of people are represented on, but not by, the BBC, to increase the relevance of the broadcaster and ensure that it serves its audience in a more equitable manner. Who knows, a re-establishment of trust between the BBC and the people and a more effective and democratic public media sphere could help to counter some of the most corrosive narratives in mainstream and social media outlets.

This paper is the basis of a presentation for 'Creating a People's BBC' (March 25th, 2022), a panel organised by The BBC and Beyond campaign, as part of the 2022 Media Reform Festival:

<https://bbcandbeyond.net/>



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## Keywords

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