

The BBC and public service broadcasting: independence, digitalisation and the Royal Charter

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By Mark Thompson¹

All of the five national analogue TV channels in Britain are public service broadcasters to some extent, because they are all subject to PSB obligations. Three of these channels, however, are exclusively PSB channels – BBC1, BBC2 and Channel 4. The PSB obligations on the other two channels have recently been diluted, and look likely to be reduced further.

Discussion of PSB in Britain focuses on the output of the BBC and Channel 4. The public is not very interested in the governance structures of the BBC, or even – more surprisingly – in the licence fee that pays for the BBC. (This fee, in effect a tax on all TV-owning households, currently stands at UK£ 131, or € 196.) But people *are* interested in the programming on PSB channels.

The BBC's legal status is established by a Royal Charter, renewable every ten years. Each Charter is accompanied by an agreement between the government and the Corporation. The Charter and Agreement oblige the BBC to produce and transmit a range of quality programmes that seek to inform, educate and entertain.

This language has entered the bloodstream of British cultural life: “inform, educate and entertain” has been a mantra for generations. As a statement of guiding principles, a ‘mission statement’, it says everything and nothing. In practice, the BBC commits itself every year to more precise and measurable objectives. These are the “key performance indicators” set out by the BBC's governors. For example, the BBC must provide a range of genres in peak time and across the day, it should lead viewers from more accessible to more challenging programming, and it should provide programming that the commercial sector ignores or marginalises.

The political and cultural climate today does not easily accept – if it accepts at all – the paternalism that has always been part of the BBC's mission and its self-importance. The Labour government of Tony Blair has, since 1997, altered the language of government expectations of the BBC. Yet the belief that PSB retains an important social and cultural role in the life of the UK is still strong, and we can see this from the White Paper of March 2006, where the government defined six purposes for the Corporation in the years ahead:

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1. sustaining citizenship and civil society
2. promoting education
3. stimulating creativity
4. reflecting the identity of the UK's nations, regions and communities
5. bringing the world to the UK and the UK to the world.
6. building digital Britain.

Furthermore, all BBC content should be at least one of the following:

1. high-quality
2. challenging
3. original
4. innovative
5. engaging

These lists drew mockery for the 'Political Correctness' of their language. (Why "promote education" rather than simply "educate"? Why "stimulate creativity" and not "be creative"?) However, you don't have to scratch very hard to find the traditional philosophy beneath this language.

For its part, the BBC has undertaken to judge all its new services by something called the Public Value Test. This will be applied by a new body called the BBC Trust, which will assess the advantages to the licence-fee payers and society as a whole, in terms of reach, quality, impact, and value for money.

Strong principles and values, then, but without detailed percentages, thresholds or instructions to the BBC management. This lack of detailed editorial guidance on implementing the Charter principles is seen – rightly – as a condition of the BBC's independence. In practice, the BBC could abuse this discretionary space. But this is only one such space: there are others, including the prime minister's scope to ensure the selection of BBC governors and the director-general; the governors' scope to express political party preferences; the director-general's scope to pull the Corporation away from its true purposes; and the senior managers' scope to compromise BBC impartiality.

The independence of the BBC depends on these bodies and individuals acting responsibly, in the wider interest, in the spirit of the Charter. It usually works. The reason why the last D-G had to resign is that he let standards slip: not just the standard of newsroom management, but the standard of his own office's accountability. This had nothing to do with political bias, and a lot to do with compromised organisational performance.

There is no single, ultimate defence of the Corporation's independence. This independence – assuming it exists – is realised daily by the people who work for it, and sustained by a broad public consensus that it should be allowed to get on with its job. The public, as I mentioned, does seem to think the BBC is worth paying for.

Political debate about the BBC is strange: sometimes very fierce, pro and contra. The Corporation is accused of being complacent, left wing, populist, elitist, arrogant, imitative. Yet there is still pretty solid agreement – despite the plethora of new

platforms – that the BBC makes a significant contribution to national life. That it should be strong enough to hold its own amid the turbulent changes in broadcasting.

This supportive attitude stems from a feeling that the BBC's privileges are justified by the quality of its output on television and radio. This attitude has lasted for decades, without interruption; it survived the so-called 'Thatcher revolution' intact. Despite the efforts of commercial lobbies and some right-wing Conservatives, there seems to be little feeling in the UK that regulation of broadcasting is a bad (illiberal) thing.

The fears for the future of PSB in Britain centre on dumbing down – the loss of prime-time range on the main channels – rather than on threats to the BBC's independence. The Corporation is still strong enough to convert sceptics who join it at high levels. There is a pattern of British 'Euro-sceptic' politicians who go to work in the European Commission and evolve into passionate pro-Europeans. In the same way, real or presumed Conservatives who are appointed to senior levels in the BBC often become passionately committed to PSB.

For the BBC has never been a "*partitocrazia*", though most of the more influential people there are probably to the left of centre, in political terms. In party terms, the last D-G, Greg Dyke, should have supported the government in 2003, instead of which he stood up to government pressure – defending the BBC "not wisely but too well", in the phrase from Shakespeare.

Ultimately the BBC's independence is underpinned by the professionalism of its journalists. The key concept is impartiality, understood as involving *accuracy*, *fairness*, and *respect for the truth*. There is an impartiality culture at the BBC, regarding news and current affairs and related strands. This doesn't mean that every item, segment or programme must be internally balanced, but that overall coverage of a theme or topic should be balanced.

Significant political pressure on the BBC does occur, but rarely: there have been no more than half a dozen major quarrels over the past half century. And the Corporation has not always been worsted in these confrontations. Most recently, the quarrel about a news report in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq had dramatic consequences: the resignations of the director-general and the chairman of the board of governors. Yet the government was magnanimous in victory (as it had to be), even though today's Cabinet is not particularly warm about the BBC.

Finally, let me add that the BBC's independence is supported by the continued existence of a second PSB. Ten years ago or so, the head of Channel 4 said that his job was "to keep the BBC honest". That was well said. This is why the government is expected to take steps in the near future to ensure C4's revenue as the gross advertising spend on TV continues to fall.

Moving on to the topic of digitalisation: as we saw, the government has given the BBC a key role in "building digital Britain", preparing for full switchover from analogue to digital television. Digital take-up, thanks mainly to Freeview – a technology driven by the BBC, and accessible through a one-off payment for a cheap set-top box – now stands at 75 per cent of UK households.

The BBC's digital role is the achievement above all of the BBC's Director-General from 1992 to 1997, John Birt, an engineer by training, who saw very early that television stood on the brink of revolutionary changes, and that the BBC needed to be at the forefront of these changes. He insisted that BBC material should be put out on as many platforms as possible, free. He convinced the Conservative government of the day that the high costs of this policy should be met with year-on-year increases in the licence fee. Today the BBC website is one of the most successful in the world, thanks to which the D-G can claim that a huge majority of the population uses BBC services.

When analogue switchover became a government commitment, the BBC was ready technically and politically to take a lead. Currently the Director-General is using this leadership role as leverage with the government to try and raise the licence-fee increases over the coming years.

The government's digital remit to the BBC has given the Corporation a huge advantage in preparing for the post-analogue era. Its very prominent role in developing and occupying new platforms has been challenged. Yet these challenges have faded in the past year or two. Commercial operators with an interest in clipping the BBC's wings still complain about the unfair use of public money to swamp private broadcasters, but their complaints lack political bite. Why should this be the case? Perhaps because success creates its own justification – when this success is broadly consistent with the traditional principles of PSB.

Oddly enough, the dizzying multiplication of platforms has provided the BBC and Channel 4 with two eloquent new arguments for PSB. The first goes that people are disoriented by the new plethora, and want to be able to trust a familiar broadcaster to select for them. (Almost as if PSBs could be the new EPGs.) Secondly, the industries that drive technical innovation have no expertise and maybe no interest in ensuring that a range of quality products is made available. The PSBs, on the other hand, can do this – provided they continue to be properly resourced.

Lastly, I have been asked to comment on the Royal Charter. The Charter is simply a means of constitutionally and legally establishing a large public, non-commercial corporation that has links to the executive (government) and is accountable to parliament, and yet is not controlled by either. What matters is that the PSBs are ring-fenced against political manipulation of their funding. The Charter achieves this. Due to our peculiar constitutional system, where the prime minister represents “the crown in parliament”, there is probably no better mechanism available in the United Kingdom. This does not mean the mechanism is exportable – any more than the BBC's peculiar ethos is exportable. There are other ways of building a strong PSB.