

FIVE ARGUMENTS ABOUT THE BBC

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1. THE BBC IS NOT ONLY A BROADCASTER

The BBC is a unique public sector cultural organisation whose purpose, since the start, is to ‘inform, educate and entertain’ the population of the United Kingdom. It so happens that broadcasting has been the primary, if not only, means of doing so. In the digital age, broadcasting is one of several means of carrying out the BBC’s essential mission. The BBC has extended into online provision of information, education and entertainment, as it should. However, it has been rebuked for doing so several times: once it was BBCBitesize in education, now it is regional news. It has also had major successes like BBC iPlayer, a platform that has shown the way for other broadcasters and public organisations.

A renewed charter will have to acknowledge that the BBC has a public service role in the digital sphere, and that it should not be constrained from performing it... so long as its role remains a public service one. The public service aspects of internet provision a few and far between, however. So the new charter should give the BBC the right to participate in – if not lead – initiatives like Martha Lane Fox’s Dot Everyone initiative, a visionary public service version of the internet. Further, the new charter should enable the BBC to provide any engineering or infrastructural provision that this initiative will entail.

2. THE BBC IS NOT ONLY A NEWS ORGANISATION

When Stephen Glover can declare (on Newsnight) that “compared to the BBC, Rupert Murdoch is a minnow”, then this really does need saying. Many lobbying organisations address the news dimension of the BBC as though it were the totality of the organisation. Discussions about the regulation of the BBC tend to be carried out as a dialogue between journalists and regulators. However, the BBC is an important and distinctive news brand around the world, known for values that are the distinctive and humane, and more impartial than virtually any other news organisation. These are values defined within the traditions of public service broadcasting. Diminish the BBC and you diminish this increasingly important aspect of UK soft power in the world.

The renewed Charter has to cover the whole of the BBC’s activities and not cut them all to suit the cloth of news. A universal provider, free at the point of viewing, remains a cultural necessity, all the more so in a fragmenting market where finding the content you want has become a struggle as [Liz Evans’ \(underfunded\) work](#) on understanding the multiscreen household has revealed. Easy- to-find content across all genres has to be provided to combat social marginalisation of households where a Sky subscription is an unaffordable option. In addition, the proper functioning of a broadcast market needs a core with and against which all the fragments can measure themselves.

3. THE BBC IS A REGULATOR

If we didn’t have the BBC, we wouldn’t have Sky News. We would have Fox News instead. The presence of the BBC defines the UK broadcasting culture, and makes it distinctive among global programme making countries. The BBC is the reason why UK television exports (formats and

programmes alike) perform astonishingly well. The strong internal culture of the BBC makes this possible: all the millions of decisions made according to loosely shared values by the thousands of people who have worked or continue to work within or for the organisation. The BBC is, and should continue to be, a universal provider committed to ensuring that the public service values of inclusion and basic humanity are firmly installed in popular content like talent shows, cookery competitions and reality TV.

The new Charter should recognise the role of the BBC in setting explicit and written programme standards. Debates about programme making ethics (and online ethics) are becoming more urgent, and some of the 'bureaucracy' of the BBC is in fact an attempt to manage the response to these growing problems. BBC Editorial Guidelines are used by all broadcasters. The BBC's weight in the market gives a public service cast to everything that comes out of UK television, and makes it distinctive in the world. Hence it is necessary now to say:

4. THE BBC IS NOT TOO BIG; IT IS TOO SMALL

The creative competition provided by the BBC is a stimulus in the UK market. The weight of commissioning to the independent sector is still crucial to that sector's future stability and growth. It is right that the BBC's own production for its own channels should reduce, but the editorial weight of its commissioning role remains crucial for development of the UK market.

The charter review process has to make a clear distinction between the provision of content and the production of services. Much BBC content is already provided through the market. BBC commissioning from independents is key to the success of the UK production sector, and will continue to be so. Here the BBC exercises a cultural and not a market power.

The provision of services includes TV and radio channels, news websites, and core technologies. Here the BBC has a market power. The question is not whether it should have that power or not, but how it uses it. The new charter should require the BBC to use its market power to ensure that the market runs in a way that is effective, distinctive and of benefit to UK consumers.

5. THE LICENCE FEE SHOULD BE LINKED TO i-PLAYER AND NOT BROADCASTING

The licence fee is an elegant mechanism for common funding of a common good. It's current form is problematic, and it needs to evolve away from the ownership of a TV set, as it did from the ownership of a radio set. The new charter should

- Uncouple the need for a licence fee from the limitation of live broadcasting.
- Require that anyone using i-Player should have a licence fee.
- Since the licence fee is for a physical address, use that to log in to i-Player.
- Say that up to 10 devices can be covered by any one licence fee.
- Think up a sensible arrangement for multiple occupancy housing like student residences, hotels and other multiple or temporary places of rest.
- Then, over time, make online access the key driver for licence fees and gradually leave old-school broadcast TV as a genuinely free service to the nation. Like BBC radio now.

If the BBC genuinely believes that TV will migrate online – which after all is the rationale for ending BBC3 as a broadcast service – then this is the obvious next stage in the evolution of licence fee funding.