



Advice Paper 16-06

March 2016

A Future for Public Service Television: Content and Platforms in a Digital World

Submission by the Royal Society of Edinburgh

Introduction

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into a Future for Public Service Television. We recognise the fundamental importance of public service broadcasting both to Scotland and to the United Kingdom as a whole.
2. The RSE notes that over the last several years we have responded to multiple consultations in the area of public television, including submissions to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the Scottish Parliament's Education and Culture Committee on the current BBC Charter Review.¹ Advice Papers have also been produced in response to consultations by the BBC Trust regarding review of news and current affairs² and on guidelines for BBC coverage of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.³ All Advice Papers produced by the Royal Society of Edinburgh can be accessed on our website.
3. As the majority of the RSE's work in this area has, to date, focussed on the BBC, the UK's largest public service broadcaster will constitute the main focus of this submission. However, we note the important role both STV and Channel 4 play in the Scottish public television ecosystem.

Social and Cultural Purposes

4. The BBC states that its mission is to enrich people's lives through programmes that "inform, education and entertain".⁴ The RSE fully supports these values, and views them as an important statement of what public service television should look to provide to the public.
5. The upcoming BBC Charter Review presents an important opportunity for the organisation to restate its priorities to the public and clearly define its public and social purposes.

¹ https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/2015/AP15_21.pdf

² https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/2013/AP13_13.pdf

³ https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/2014/AP14_01.pdf

⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howweare/mission_and_values

6. The UK has a wide and diverse audience, and public service broadcasters (PSBs) must meet the demand of this audience for education, entertainment and information. Public service broadcasters also serve to raise the standard of programming across the commercial sector by allowing other broadcasters to justify the levels of investment in their own shows in order to compete.

Television in a Digital Age

7. It is imperative that PSBs continue to be able to create high-quality and marketable content, and (particularly in the case of the BBC) remain globally relevant in the digital age. While the operating revenues of British PSBs compare favourably to those of other European countries (the BBC has the highest revenue of any European PSB, while Channel 4 ranks seventh)⁵ such comparisons do not take into account the true competition. As the primary PSB in the UK, the BBC must be of a scale to be able to compete globally with companies such as Sky, Amazon and Netflix.
8. While the RSE recognises that it may not always be possible for public service broadcasters to be at the forefront of technological change, as the BBC was with the introduction of iPlayer, these organisations must ensure that they keep up with advances and are not left behind by their commercial rivals. The RSE notes that currently, the BBC spends just £201m on BBC Online and Red Button services, compared to £653m on radio and £2.4bn on television.⁶ The distinction between these services is significantly less clear than it once was and the BBC should be encouraged to undertake a radical review of its portfolio of services across the board. Irrespective of this, it is inevitable that over the next decade the resources deployed to each method of delivery will change.
9. We are concerned by the signal sent out by BBC Worldwide in closing its global iPlayer app and moving back toward web-based activity. Potential existed for this platform to provide both over-the-top streaming content as well as on-demand and paid-for downloads outside of the UK. If the BBC is to fulfil one of its six stated public purposes of “[b]ringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK” it is important that it keeps pace with changing technology. The web-based BBC online store, launched in 2015, felt dated even before its launch.
10. Recent evidence suggests that 65 million people regularly access BBC iPlayer from outwith the UK using virtual private networks to evade web controls, with around 38.5 million users from China alone.⁷ This strongly suggests that there is significant international demand for BBC content which the organisation must work to exploit much more effectively.

Funding

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445704/BBC_Charter_Review_Consultation_WEB.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-33620341>

11. The RSE considers that it is inevitable that the way in which the BBC is funded will change and believes that the organisation should begin discussions over, and experimentation with, different funding models. Any alternative to the licence fee model must be tested against the ability to maintain the British system of content creation associated with commissioning risk and editorial protection, and separated from commercial and political interest. It would be a considerable error on the part of the BBC to simply wait for support for the licence fee to disappear before addressing the issue.
12. We anticipate that a new funding model for the BBC is likely to include an element of subscription, perhaps linked to a household levy for the provision of a core service. This core service could be supplemented with the option of purchasing additional programmes or 'bundles' according to taste. The recent success of media companies such as Spotify, Netflix and Deezer has shown a general willingness from the public to pay for content, provided it is reasonably priced and convenient to access.
13. The RSE notes that while we accept that the model of funding through the licence fee is unsustainable in the long-term, we fully support the principle of earmarked public funding being used for the public good. It is important that there remains public support for public money being spent on television for the public good. However, for this support to continue the BBC must consider, and more precisely define, what genuinely constitutes the public good and public service. The RSE believes there is a strong case for the BBC to publish its social purposes in addition to its public purposes.
14. If a subscription service were to be adopted, there would rightly be concern that less popular programming could 'fall through the cracks' and disappear from television altogether. Popular shows with a large audience would thrive as the public would likely be happy to pay for such content. However, shows which the audience might also enjoy, but were viewed less frequently or sporadically, could struggle to continue. The BBC's editorial strategy would have to sustain its commitment to the development and delivery of less popular and more demanding content.
15. A facility that ensured that low-income households were not priced out of accessing the core services would also need to be adopted. The RSE recognises the argument that a subscription model could potentially deny some of the poorest in society access to BBC services and would strongly endorse measures to ensure this does not happen. We note that currently, while free or discounted licences are offered to those aged over 75, registered blind or in residential care, no such reduced rate is available to those on low incomes.

Regulation

16. It is widely accepted that the Trust model of regulating the BBC cannot be sustained. While the RSE believes that consideration should be given to whether it is feasible for Ofcom to perform this role for a reformed BBC, the RSE notes that, due to its unique status as a non-commercial, public service, global broadcaster, the establishment of a separate regulator to deal with the complexities of the BBC may be more appropriate.

17. Furthermore, the RSE considers that the Scottish Parliament should be in a position to hold BBC Scotland and the BBC in Scotland to account. It is appropriate that the BBC should make itself available to some form of scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament despite public service broadcasting remaining a reserved matter.
18. The RSE notes the Scottish Government's proposals for a more federal approach to the structure of the BBC. Irrespective of whether such a settlement is reached, any new governance and regulatory structure for the organisation should not undermine the BBC's independence from governments and politicians.

Performance and Representation of UK Citizens

19. As we have suggested in previous papers, the RSE considers universality to be a vital tenet of the BBC's 'mission', underpinning its editorial approach across information, education and entertainment. It is important that the tone of all content should be inclusive, taking audiences across the UK into account.
20. The RSE notes the serious weaknesses in the approach of BBC news programmes identified by Anthony King in the Report published in 2008.⁸ It was clear that BBC News had failed to respond appropriately to the changing constitutional arrangements of the UK. It is regrettable that eight years later the recommendations of the King Report have not been fully implemented.
21. The King Report stressed that reform of BBC News was a priority and suggested a different approach to reporting the United Kingdom to the public in every part of the UK. We consider that change is required across the board. With the passage of the Cities and Local Government Act in January 2016 some 55% of the UK population will experience a form of decentralised decision-making. Unfortunately, the BBC approach and tone continues to be too 'London-centric' with inadequate coverage of the devolved administrations and regions. It requires a culture change across the news directorate.
22. The BBC has largely failed to report adequately on the major devolved issues. For example, a health or education issue will be described as relating to England or Scotland, but that is usually as far as it goes. BBC network news has not met the challenge of covering these areas in a more textured and sophisticated way that would be meaningful, and enlightening, for audiences across the UK. The different approaches taken in different parts of the UK provide a rich source for a journalism that is more holistic, nuanced and better informed, relating the experiences of people in different parts of the UK to each other. Sadly, it is rarely done. BBC network news must develop a less simplistic approach to the coverage of domestic policy.
23. In parallel with strengthening its UK coverage the BBC must provide a stronger news service for Scotland. On radio, listeners have long had a choice of news programmes, covering international and national issues, edited from Glasgow or London. The RSE is of the view that

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http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/uk_nations_impartiality.pdf

such a choice should exist on television, with the provision of an integrated international and national news service edited in Scotland. It is long overdue. In this context, we welcome the recent creation of the post of Scotland Editor. We will watch with interest the effect that this has on the nature and content of Scotland coverage at UK level.

24. The increase in US content consumed by UK audiences through various media providers is also a concern. The production of British drama is one of the biggest risks taken on by PSBs and must continue to be so. If a laissez faire attitude is adopted then high-quality British drama will be in danger of disappearing from our screens and being permanently replaced by American imports.

Additional Information

Consultation responses are produced on behalf of RSE Council by an appropriately diverse working group in whose expertise and judgement the Council has confidence. This Advice Paper has been signed off by the General Secretary.

Any enquiries about this response should be addressed to Craig Denham, Policy Advice Officer (cdenham@royalsoced.org.uk).

All responses are published on the RSE website (www.royalsoced.org.uk).