

Submission by Prof Jay Blumler to *A Future for Public Service Television Inquiry*

A Note on the BBC's Public Purposes

Knowing that the Inquiry is involved in discussions of the future of the BBC, I welcome this opportunity to make a short submission in relation to the wording of the Corporation's purposes in its next Charter and Agreement. Their formulation could play an important part in any mechanisms of regulation and accountability that may be set up in the new dispensation. My focus is that purpose among the six in the present version, which refers to 'Sustaining citizenship and civil society'. In my view, that wording is so general that any editor of any news outlet could claim to subscribe to and to be serving it – is inadequate, then, for the news and current affairs provision of a corner-stone public service broadcaster.

I would like to suggest an amplified version of this purpose as follows:

Sustaining citizenship by –

- Providing information and analysis of current events and ideas
- Presenting the main options among different ways of dealing with current issues
- Ensuring that the experiences and views of all sectors of society likely to be affected by proposed policies are presented and heard

The adequacy of BBC news and current affairs seems to have featured little in the debate on the Corporation's Charter Review. In a way this is understandable. In its TV and radio output the BBC schedules many news-related programmes. It employs many specialist correspondents (including Westminster-based ones) and experienced political interviewers. Research has empirically demonstrated that its political coverage is somewhat more substantive than that of advertising-financed providers.

That said, troubling signs have emerged in the BBC's reporting of politics in the recent past of: a near-monolithic framing of key issues (e.g. the sources of and policy imperatives for dealing with the financial crisis); a receptivity to the Conservative Party's highly professionalized news management tactics (cf. the Loughborough and Cardiff Universities' content analyses of TV coverage of the 2015 election campaign); and some sharing of the news agendas of the Daily Mail, Telegraph and the Times.

Put more generally, I consider that there has been a decline and diminution in the civic mission of BBC news and current affairs in recent years. That too would be understandable. The main drivers of such a trend would be: the BBC's embroilment in an unrelenting competition to attract and hold onto audience attention in today's ecology of abundant channels, news outlets and reception devices; a drift away from a mixture of sacerdotal and pragmatic approaches to political news toward a more purely pragmatic one – entailing, then, a more central role for conventional news values (conflict, concreteness, immediacy, dramatization, etc.) in the selection, ordering, presentation of and commentary on daily events; and perhaps a closer integration into a journalistic culture that is largely shaped by the mainstream press.

I am not suggesting that material from the above analytical paragraphs should be incorporated into a submission to bodies involved in the Charter Review process. But they serve to explain why my proposed re-wording of a civic communication purpose has homed in on BBC news and current affairs specifically.