

## The BBC: a radical rethink

Contrary to widespread expectations and fears, the government's recent white paper on BBC Charter Renewal preserves the BBC's license fee for at least the remainder of the current parliament. That has come as welcome relief to those who feared a giant sell-off or switch to subscription funding, and an end to the BBC's unique public service mandate as we know it. Though the door remains open to these pathways in the future, public ownership and license fee funding seem to have been temporarily secured. A much more worrying development, however, concerns proposed changes to the BBC's governance and a system of appointments that threatens encroachment on the BBC's editorial autonomy.

What's particularly striking about this development is that it pushes in the general direction of growing state control of public service media, spearheaded by countries like Hungary and Poland. A new media law that came into effect in Poland earlier this year, for instance, consolidates the executive's power of appointments in public broadcasters. It was one of the first legislative moves of the new government led by the right wing Law and Justice Party. As Reporters without Borders [declared](#) earlier this year:

*This new law, giving the government full powers to appoint and dismiss the heads of the public broadcast media, constitutes a flagrant violation of media freedom and pluralism*

The white paper for Charter Renewal proposes a new 'unitary board' of which the majority and most senior members will be appointed by government. For the first time in its history, such an approach threatens to give a direct government appointee overall editorial responsibility for all of the BBC's output.

What's equally striking about this move, is that it flies in the face of what the government has long intimated was at the heart of its Charter Renewal agenda: introducing a system of contestable funding to effectively break up the BBC and enable more local and more commercial providers to take a slice of the license fee. Understandably, that struck fear in the minds of those who rightly believe that the BBC must remain entirely in public hands and entirely not-for-profit.

But defensive arguments against top-slicing tend to oppose any possibility of decentralisation in the BBC's structure and governance, and assume that the BBC's strength lies in its scale and unitary composition. This is assumed to provide a robust defence against both government and market pressures, but there is more reason to think that the exact opposite is the case. A centralised and concentrated BBC is intrinsically more vulnerable to editorial pressures precisely because they can filter down the chain of governors, directors, managers and editors. If a government did seek to shape or control the BBC's agenda, it would have a far more difficult job if it had to contend with a network of editorially autonomous outlets than with a single command and control centre.

Such a network need not involve any degree of privatisation or commercialisation. Indeed, a 'networked' BBC – provided it was structured in the right way – could also be more immune to market pressures that many believe have fostered homogenisation of the BBC's news output and a growing dependency on a commercial-press led agenda.

So what would such a networked structure look like? As it turns out, we don't have to look much further than our own national doorstep for an example. The Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO) in Holland has long been founded on just such a system that distributes airtime and resources among a network of affiliate and member-led broadcasting organisations. Holland was ranked the 2<sup>nd</sup> freest media system in the world by Reporters without Borders in [2016](#) and although it has faced recent

cutbacks and consolidation, the NPO has proved relatively resilient to the pressures of digitisation. Like the BBC, it continues to demonstrate enduring public value, as reflected in the strength of its member-based affiliates and the reach of its online services.

The bulk of channels and airtime assigned to NPO is shared among 10 broadcasting associations. Eight of these function as audience cooperatives, with membership bases that reflect the diversity of interests and groups in Dutch society. The remaining two are 'task-based' broadcasters specialising predominantly in news, current affairs and other factual programming. The NPO is charged with administering this network but does not have overall editorial responsibility for output.

With editorial autonomy thus enshrined into its structure, and accountability to audiences cemented by membership-driven governance, the NPO is intrinsically independent in a way that the BBC never has been, from its compromised reporting of the General Strike in 1926 to its infamous capitulation in the face of government flak over the Iraq War in 2003.

If such an alternative sounds unthinkably radical, that only reflects how restricted the terms of public debate over the BBC's future have become. Indeed, the very words 'radical' and 'reform' in the context of the BBC have been so co-opted that they seem to automatically signal cuts or closure rather than any kind of progressive enhancement of the BBC's public service function.

Of course there is always the danger that even consideration of a reconfigured BBC along networked lines – which could take any number of forms – could open a back door route to privatisation or top slicing. But if anything, the government's white paper for Charter Renewal takes a step in the opposite direction and reveals its true hand: in spite of the rhetoric, a large scale, centralised BBC has always been more consonant with the interests of state-corporate power than it is in conflict, notwithstanding periodic headaches and crises engendered by the off pesky journalist.

Of course a much more outspoken critique focuses precisely on the BBC's size and scale which is seen as the major threat to media plurality in the UK. From this perspective, the decline of newspapers threatens to erode any checks on the near monopoly status enjoyed by the BBC. Rather than worrying about the agenda influence of mainstream media in general, these [arguments](#) suggest that we should be concerned exclusively with the overarching reach and influence of the BBC.

But how far does the BBC's own news agenda reflect or align with that of its commercial competitors? When scholars at [Cardiff University](#) set out to investigate this question during the 2015 UK general election, they found that the BBC's overall issue-agenda appeared to have been consistently led by the predominantly right-wing national newspapers. The extent of this alignment was corroborated by other research conducted at [Loughborough University](#)<sup>i</sup> and by the [Media Standards Trust](#), revealing a strong correlation between the range and rank order of issues covered by both television and the press, and one that did not fully accord with public priorities as demonstrated by monthly issue tracking polls.

The important point this raises for the future of the BBC is twofold. First, if commercial press exercise a strong influence over the BBC's political news coverage, it makes little sense to consider it a meaningful counterweight to the BBC's dominance of news consumption. The evidence from the 2015 election suggests that if anything, the BBC amplified an agenda that was set largely by the commercial press. Second, and by the same token, we ought to be equally sceptical of suggestions that the BBC provides a substantive check on the more partisan editorial agenda of the commercial press.

At a time when many public service broadcasters around the world are facing varying degrees of existential crises, public debate is all too often reduced to a choice between preservation or market-

based reforms; with the latter usually amounting to cutbacks or closures. What's left off the agenda is the possibility of radical democratic reform aimed at reconstituting the independence and accountability of public service media. The idea that a substantive section of any pluralistic media system needs to be in public hands is one that retains a great deal of force, in spite of the digital transition and corresponding end of channel scarcity. But the way in which public service broadcasters are structured, regulated and governed can have profound implications for independence in relation to both the state and market.

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<sup>i</sup> See General Election 2015 – Media analysis from Loughborough University Communication Research Centre. Available at <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/general-election/> (last accessed 28 March, 2016).