

Building a vision for a People's BBC

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Public service media reimagined and revitalised

Public service broadcasting, and the BBC in particular, is facing an unprecedented period of instability. From real-terms cuts to the BBC imposed through successive licence fee freezes, to plans to privatise Channel 4, to the ongoing uncertainty about prominence on streaming platforms, the fight to preserve the core principles of public service broadcasting is under way on many fronts. There is nothing new, of course, about governments preferring a compliant BBC, or a more commercialised public service broadcasting sector. What *is* new is the number of those in government willing to talk openly about the end of the BBC altogether, or doing away with the concept of public service broadcasting as we know it – which the privatisation of Channel 4 would take us one step closer towards.

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This crisis is also occurring at a time of declining support for the BBC. Data on this can be complex to interpret, partly because the institution is so large and multifaceted, and also because research is often designed to serve a particular agenda rather than genuinely answer questions. Some claim that the BBC’s role in UK public life is unassailable, mostly based on data around news consumption, as the institution remains the dominant source of news in the UK and is among the most trusted – broadly comparable with other broadcasters and broadsheets.¹ However, by a

1 Ofcom (2021) ‘News consumption in the UK: 2021’, Jigsaw Research. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/powerpoint_doc/0026/222479/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2021-report.pptx

number of measures, the BBC's position in public life is increasingly precarious. Young people see it as increasingly irrelevant² and, for the first time, satisfaction among older viewers is waning.³ Non-payment of the licence fee is growing, and is highest in Scotland (10 per cent) and Northern Ireland (9 per cent), compared with around 6 per cent in England and Wales.⁴ Ofcom research shows that trust in BBC news generally declined between 2018 and 2020, but with particularly precipitous declines among those who self-defined as very left- or right-wing (from 67 per cent to 47 per cent), who are more likely to be politically active and vocal about their views.⁵

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The BBC faces many bad faith detractors, and it is undeniable that a weakened BBC at this moment would only further empower the likes of Rupert Murdoch and Mark Zuckerberg, given how concentrated commercial media has become. It is understandable, therefore, that campaigns around the BBC tend to defend the status quo and minimise this longer-term waning of support. However, this strategy of generalised resistance did little to affect the outcome of the 2017 BBC Charter renewal process, and our voices at the Media Reform Coalition (MRC) were something of an outlier in calling for relatively minor reforms such as a progressive replacement of the licence fee. Rather than protecting the institution, the BBC's position has only become more tenuous since then, with real-terms reductions in funding shrinking key areas of production, and it could realistically face an existential threat by the time of the next Charter review in 2027.

The MRC believes that it is paramount that we acknowledge and address the challenges, embrace the opportunities of the current context and

2 Jigsaw Research and Ofcom (2020) *An Exploration of People's Relationship with PSB, with a Particular Focus on the Views of Young People*. Ofcom. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/199104/exploration-of-peoples-relationship-with-psb.pdf

3 Ofcom (2020) *Annual report on the BBC: 2019/20*. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/207228/third-bbc-annual-report.pdf

4 Woodhouse J and Zayed Y (2022) *TV Licence Fee Statistics*. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8101/>

5 Newman N with Fletcher R, Schulz A, Andi S and Nielsen RK (2020) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*, Reuters Institute. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

campaign for a positive vision of how the institution could be transformed. Articulating this vision for public broadcasting, and for our media system more generally, has been the central work of the MRC's 'BBC and Beyond' campaign.⁶ We spent 2021 running public events that engaged around 30,000 people, doing interviews and holding workshops with dozens of individuals and organisations, to understand how they imagined a media system that could face the challenges of the future.

Out of these conversations we wrote a *Manifesto for a People's Media*,⁷ containing a comprehensive vision of a 'media commons'. Commons are a shared resource, governed collectively by a community according to their rules and norms – practices known as 'commoning'.⁸ A media commons would contain a transformed People's BBC and People's Channel 4, as well as a thriving ecology of independent media organisations, supported by significant new public resources. What would unite all of the different kinds of organisations in the media commons would be their commitment to core values – values of being independent, democratic, accountable and for everyone – and 'commoning' practices for living these out. These values inform our vision and proposals for building a People's BBC.

In terms of independence, ensuring that a People's BBC can operate free from government and commercial pressures is paramount. Funding levels would be taken out of government hands and set by an independent body. Potential models to follow exist in Finland, where public funding for media sits outside of the main state budget, and in Germany where its equivalent of the licence fee is set by a non-governmental body called KEF in order to limit political interference.

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Here in the UK, we also have the example of the Press Recognition Panel (PRP), set up following the Leveson Inquiry to ensure that regulators of the UK news publishers are independent, properly funded and able to protect the public. The PRP's board members can only be removed by the

6 Media Reform Coalition, 'BBC and Beyond'. <https://bbcandbeyond.net>

7 Grayson D (2021) *Manifesto for a People's Media*. Media Reform Coalition. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_6GeXiDR3DGh1sYjFl_hbgV9HfLWzhPi/view

8 P2P Foundation (2017) *Commons Transition and P2P: A primer*. <http://www.p2plab.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CT-P2P-primer.pdf>

9 PRP (no date) 'PRP board members'. <https://pressrecognitionpanel.org.uk/the-board/>

unanimous agreement of the other board members,⁹ and its structures and governance can only be amended by a two-thirds majority of each of the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Scottish parliament, and with the unanimous agreement of the board itself. A similar kind of structure for a body that sets the licence fee level could protect it from influence from powerful external forces.

Independence at the BBC is undermined through government involvement in senior appointments. The *Manifesto* proposes that all government appointments at the BBC, as well as at Channel 4 and Ofcom, should end. Instead, we propose that boards of all three organisations should have worker representation, and that the wider public should also have a say about who sits on those boards – this could be through direct elections, electing an appointments panel or having a range of civil society representatives.

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Careful design would be necessary to ensure that this facilitated meaningful participation. For example, if licence fee payers could directly elect the BBC’s director general, we could see very low turnout at elections (as we’ve seen at many of the elections of police and crime commissioners), running the risk of creating a lot of volatility for the BBC while not really making it more democratic. On the other hand, broadcasters like the BBC are perfectly placed to publicise their own elections and inform the public about candidates and their positions. Voting could also be connected to paying the licence fee to increase participation – for example, if everyone had to pay at a particular time of year, they could be given the opportunity to vote for candidates at the same time, guaranteeing a good turnout.

Our proposals to make a People’s BBC more democratic are premised first and foremost on it being significantly more decentralised than today, with programme making, editorial functions and budgeting (for all content, not just news) largely sitting with the devolved nations and English regions. Regions could pool resources to create more expensive kinds of programming, like high-end dramas and complex investigative journalism, but decisionmaking would be largely decentralised. This devolved structure would be better placed to make programmes that fully represented the concerns and experiences of the whole country, while also creating new avenues for citizens to participate.

Participation in a People’s BBC by the wider public would be coordinated through a network of citizen media assemblies. These could develop

practices and procedures suitable for their areas, overseeing a range of forms of participation such as elections for regional boards, selecting citizens' juries to monitor coverage of controversial issues and auditing commissioning, for example to ensure that people from minority groups are represented. Greater democracy would also be facilitated among the workforce, with journalists empowered through a conscience clause to refuse unethical assignments, a strong voice for media unions and worker representation on BBC boards.

A People's BBC would be more accountable to its audiences. The *Manifesto* proposes that responsibility for regulating public media should move from Ofcom to a new institution, on the basis that Ofcom's brief has become too large and it is not able to handle complaints effectively.¹⁰ Ofcom would continue with its other duties like overseeing broadband and mobile providers, fixed-line telecommunications and postal services, with the new regulator – perhaps named 'Mediacom' – taking on responsibility for regulating broadcasters as well as social media and other digital platforms. Just as the People's BBC and the People's Channel 4 would be radically decentralised, Mediacom would have a similar devolved structure, and work closely with localised citizen media assemblies.

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By being connected to assemblies rooted in communities, Mediacom's code could be responsive to evolving ideas of what is harmful and what constitutes meaningful redress – especially important given that its remit would include online harms. Codes would be regularly consulted on and revised, learning from the iterative approach currently being practised by

¹⁰ This is partly due to a cumbersome and opaque division of labour between broadcasters' internal complaints mechanisms and Ofcom's. For example, Ofcom received 2,124 complaints during the 2019 general election but only undertook one investigation, as most of these needed to be assessed by the BBC first; Ofcom (2020) *Annual Reports and Accounts: For the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903069/ofcom-annual-report-and-accounts-2019-20.pdf). In other cases, there have been significant delays and contradictory rulings, such as Ofcom's investigation into 7,300 complaints about Channel 4's *Dispatches: The Truth about Traveller Crime* programme. The ruling, which took 16 months to be published, acknowledged that parts of the programme “had the potential to cause harm and offence by perpetuating negative stereotypes of Gypsies and Travellers as widely participating in violent and criminal activity” and that “this could have had the effect of exacerbating tensions”, yet Ofcom did not uphold the complaint; The Traveller Movement (2021) ‘Ofcom ruling on C4 Dispatches broadcast “The Truth about Traveller Crime”’. <https://travellermovement.org.uk/news/ofcom-ruling-on-c4-dispatches-broadcast-the-truth-about-traveller-crime>

the Leveson-compliant independent press regulator, IMPRESS.¹¹ These codes would have a baseline rooted in equalities and human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, but could also vary across the country to account for local concerns. Beyond this kind of formal regulation, deeper forms of accountability would also be encouraged through participation and measures to ensure that the workforce was fully representative of wider society.

Universalism – such that media institutions are set up to be ‘for everyone’ – is a key tenet of public service broadcasting. Arguably it is the public service principle that is most in need of being reaffirmed and reimagined for a digital age, as it runs so counter to the logic of highly personalised commercial platforms. Campaigns to justify the licence fee as ‘good value for money’ to individuals may have inadvertently reinforced this consumer framing, sidelining arguments about the need to invest in the BBC as a collective good. A People’s BBC would be funded by a progressive household levy rather than the current regressive flat-tax licence fee, and it would be generally accepted that wealthier people should pay more for this public service, as with the NHS. While for the NHS this progressive form of taxation is through national insurance contributions linked to earnings, the most straightforward way to create a progressive household levy would be to link it to council tax bands.

This funding stream for a People’s BBC would be decoupled from ownership of a television and instead levied according to whether a house has an internet connection, in recognition of the fact that in the future this will become the dominant way in which people access BBC content – just as the television licence replaced the previous radio licence. At the same time, affordable full-fibre broadband would be guaranteed to all homes, to address digital exclusion and ensure that these technologies can be used to their full potential to facilitate participation. A British Digital Cooperative would sit alongside the BBC, and be responsible for creating surveillance-free digital platforms with the highest accessibility standards.¹²

Citizen media assemblies would be used to critically interrogate how to translate universalism to a digital context, for example by making choices about how personalised they want their local iPlayer to be, and what kinds

11 IMPRESS (no date) ‘Code review 2020–2022’. <https://www.impress.press/standards/code-review.html>

12 Hind D (2019) *The British Digital Cooperative*. Common Wealth. <https://www.commonwealth.co.uk/reports/the-british-digital-cooperative-a-new-model-public-sector-institution>

of content they want to give prominence to. The Welsh citizen media assembly, for example, could decide for a time to prioritise programmes made by the Northern Irish BBC, and to collaborate on a series of joint programmes, if it felt it was in the interests of citizens to learn more about that part of the UK. This would allow citizens across the UK to develop deeper connections and understanding between different regions and nations, rather than the ‘national’ conversation being constantly dominated by elites in London.

The *Manifesto* also proposes a People’s Channel 4, which would be similarly decentralised and democratised. Its remit would be strengthened to focus once more on serving young people and people from minority groups and supporting innovation within film and television.¹³ To secure its long-term future in an era when television advertising revenue is in decline, and to free it from commercial pressures, we propose that a People’s Channel 4 would be funded by a levy on advertising spending across all technologies and platforms. The MRC has proposed a 5 per cent tax, which would raise more than £1 billion a year.¹⁴ The level of funding could be overseen by the same body setting the BBC licence fee to guarantee independence from government. Being funded in this way would allow it to run without adverts and centre its public mission.

“For public service broadcasting to survive, we have to show its relevance”

As we are forced to defend the most basic building blocks of our public service broadcasting system, the kind of transformed media the *Manifesto* envisions can seem very distant. Yet there is no denying that change is coming, as the UK continues to face constitutional upheaval, public health emergencies and an intensifying climate crisis. For public service broadcasting to survive, we have to show its relevance and how it can be part of both empowering and connecting communities to meet those huge challenges. A People’s BBC and Channel 4 could lead the world in

13 While these elements are still part of Channel 4’s remit and are reflected in some of its programming, an increasingly commercial ethos since the 1990s has often seen them sidelined in favour of cheaper and/or internationally marketable genres such as reality TV; see for example Mills T (2021) ‘Fighting the privatisation of Channel 4’, *Tribune*, 1 July 2021. <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/07/fighting-the-privatisation-of-channel-4>

14 Media Reform Coalition (2021) ‘Media Reform Coalition submission to House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry on the privatisation of Channel 4’. <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/MRC-submission-to-Lords-C4-privatisation-inquiry.pdf>

showing the possibilities that could emerge when public service media are reimagined and revitalised as part of a thriving media commons.

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