

Submission to BBC Strategy Review consultation
Des Freedman, Natalie Fenton, James Curran, Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media
Research Centre

24 May 2010

The context

The proposals expressed in the Strategy Review document (BBC 2010) are predicated on the parlous state of public service broadcasting in a highly volatile media market. The document argues that ‘media is at an inflection point’ and ‘the traditional balance in UK public broadcasting is breaking down’ (2010: 7) thus requiring a redistribution of funds from some minority services to ‘core’ channels and networks. In our submission, we wish to focus on one area only: the proposals to cut back on certain services and outlets in the light of a perceived need to ‘do fewer things better’ in the context of a challenging economic and political climate for public service broadcasting. Empirical evidence suggests however that, while we are seeing significant shifts in the UK media landscape, we are not yet seeing the transformations that justify either the general proposition that public service media are an imperiled species or the specific recommendations put in the Review document.

First, despite the growth of online services, we appear to be watching *more*, not less, television overall: from 3.44 hours per day in 2003 to 3.45 in 2008 (Ofcom 2009: 67). According to industry body Thinkbox, Britons watched a record amount of traditional linear TV in the first three months of 2010 – more than 30 hours per week, 2.5 hours more than in the previous year. (Thinkbox 2010). Second, viewing is still largely dominated by the five terrestrial PSB channels operated by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Five. At the start of 2009, these channels had a audience share of just under 61 per cent of all households (Ofcom 2009: 67). It is also not the case that digital viewers are set to abandon the offerings of the PSB networks. Even in cable and satellite homes, some 47 per cent of viewing is focused on these five channels, a figure that rises to 62 per cent in digital terrestrial homes (Ofcom 2009: 131). Indeed, the decline in audiences for the main PSB channels is partially offset by the growth in viewing of their ‘portfolio’ channels, the additional offerings available to digital audiences (like BBC3, ITV2, More4 and Fiver). The success of these channels has meant that audiences for the total output of the PSB operators in multichannel homes have actually *increased* in recent years: from a 64.7 per cent share in 2003 to 71.9 per cent in 2008 (Ofcom 2009: 132).

PSB channels and their ‘portfolio’ siblings account for a majority of viewing in virtually every demographic. True, BBC1 and ITV1 do not have the stranglehold over audiences that they used to, but their influence is qualitatively greater than any other non-PSB channel. For example, the most popular BSkyB channel, Sky Sports 1, attracts a mere 1.4 per cent of the multichannel audience (Ofcom 2009: 141) while the *total* share for Sky programmes (including all of its sports, movies, news and entertainment channels) has actually fallen from 11.7 per cent in 2002 to 6.8 per cent in 2008 (2009: 138). Contrast this to the 14.3 million viewers, an audience share of *53 per cent*, who tuned in to watch BBC1’s Christmas 2008 special of *Wallace & Gromit* (Robinson 2008: 13).

Radio appears to face a more challenging time with a decline in average listening from 22.1 hours per week in 2003 to 20.1 in 2008 (Ofcom 2009: 149). However, the BBC's share of the total audience has *increased* during this time from 52.8 per cent to 55.7 per cent. Latest figures from 2010 show the BBC in an even stronger position with a 56.5 per cent audience share (Plunkett 2010). Indeed, while the total numbers of hours spent listening to BBC Radio services is relatively flat, the time spent listening to commercial radio has declined by 11.4 per cent since 2003 (Ofcom 2009: 181). There is a similar pattern in terms of audience reach with two-thirds of the adult population tuning in to a BBC service each week, a figure that has remained stable in contrast to a three percentage point decline for commercial radio since 2003 (2009: 181).

Far from revealing a collapse in public support for the programmes of the BBC, audience ratings continue to show a sustained loyalty to BBC services. This is a delicate ecology that the proposals in the Strategy Review threaten to disrupt. We are far from convinced that they can be justified.

Strategic Principles

The BBC has 5 strategic principles: are these the right ones?

1. putting quality first, including five areas of editorial focus for all BBC services
2. doing fewer things better – including stopping activities in some areas
3. guaranteeing access for all licence fee payers to BBC services
4. making the licence fee work harder – being efficient and offering better value for money
5. setting new boundaries

It seems to us that the focus of the Strategy Review document is not to change the overall remit of the BBC but to introduce specific proposals aimed at slimming down the Corporation in order better to face an uncertain financial future. We support the Director General's call for 'a BBC focused on high-quality content and enduring values, keeping open a public space for all' (BBC 2010: 3) but believe that the proposals, if introduced, would lead to a reduction in quality, would signify a shrinking of ambition and would undermine the public space facilitated by the BBC. Therefore we contest the need for the second principle identified above: there should be no intrinsic commitment to scale down services and reduce output. There is always a case to look at the BBC's overall financial management (including payment to senior staff and best paid 'talent', property development costs and commercial acquisitions) but there should not be a strategic focus on 'doing fewer things better'.

Similarly, 'putting quality first' depends on your understanding of quality. Quality has traditionally been understood in public service culture not as referring to individual instances of high production values, big budgets or the pursuit of large audiences but in terms of the widest possible attempt to engage the British population in conversation about issues and themes in which they are interested. This can involve audiences in the tens of millions but it can also involve much smaller, 'minority' audiences in such a way as 1) their particular interests will be served and 2) they are more likely to participate in issues of common

concern. The proposals as sketched out in the Strategy Review will serve to damage the quality of BBC provision overall.

Should the BBC have any other strategic principles?

The BBC should take note of the purposes and characteristics of public service broadcasting as set out in the second phase of Ofcom's second Public Service Broadcasting Review which identified out the following core principles for PSB (Ofcom 2008: 13):

- Informing our understanding of the world
- Stimulating knowledge and learning
- Reflecting UK cultural identity
- Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints.

These aims can be achieved by programming that is 'high quality', 'original', 'innovative', 'challenging', 'engaging' and 'widely available' (2008: 13).

There is little point in realizing the principles set out in the Strategy Review document, such as guaranteeing access to BBC services and 'making the licence fee work harder' if the BBC's output does not speak fully to its users. The BBC, therefore, needs to continue to invest in content that speaks to *all* its audiences, demonstrates real originality and independence, challenges existing 'common sense' ideas and acts as a spirited champion of licence fee payers and not government, the Trust, the Executive or other powerful forces that are more likely to be able to speak for themselves.

Doing fewer things and doing them better

Close Radio 6 Music and focussing the BBC's pop music output on Radio 1 and Radio 2

Close Asian Network as a national service and aiming to serve Asian audiences better in other ways on other BBC services

Change BBC local radio stations, by investing more in breakfast, morning and drivetime shows, but share content across local stations at other times of the day

Close the BBC's teen zone, BBC Switch

Close the teenage learning offer Blast!

Make the BBC's website smaller, with fewer sections. (We do not yet have the details of what will be cut)

We welcome your views on these areas

Simply cutting back on services offered in order to concentrate resources in fewer areas does not guarantee an improvement in quality. It appears that the desire to 're-focus' is, at least in part, a response to a vigorous lobby by the BBC's commercial rivals (in most areas), that the BBC is, in the words of one its sternest critics James Murdoch, engaged in a 'land-grab, pure and simple' and that 'in the interests of a free society it should be sternly resisted' (Murdoch

2009). The assumption that targeted cuts and closures will increase or protect quality chimes not with public perception but with the prime minister's claim made in 2008 that the BBC is 'piling into areas where sometimes it can crush small businesses starting up on the internet...' (quoted in Fenton 2008). An ICM poll in 2009, on the other hand, revealed *increased* public confidence in the BBC and a firm desire (expressed by 79 per cent of the sample) for the BBC not to charge for its website even if a charge would help to level the playing field (Glover 2009). The BBC's prime loyalty is to licence fee payers, not its commercial rivals nor the UK media market as a whole.

We are mystified why 6 Music and Asian Network have been singled out for closure. The Strategy Review document praises some radio stations for 'representing impressive value for money' (BBC 2010: 38) and praises others, in particular 1Xtra and Radio 4, for making 'a unique and significant contribution to the purposes of the BBC' (2010: 38). In highlighting both financial and non-financial criteria, it is difficult to see why 6 Music and Asian Network merit termination while others do not. The document complains that the cost per listener hour of Asian Network at 6.9 pence is 'very high' (2010: 41) but it is well below that of other 'niche' stations like Radio Scotland at 7.1 pence and Radio Cymru at 11.5 pence per hour (Ofcom 2009: 170) who have not been earmarked for closure. On the other hand, it clearly addresses a particular minority community that has been under-served and whose voices have been marginalized on broader BBC services (Georgiou 2002). The Strategy Review argues that the 'increasing plurality and diversity of British Asian audiences are stretching the coherence and relevance of the service' (BBC 2010: 41) but surely this is a case not for closing the service down but thinking of ways in which the network can relate to these important structural and cultural changes. Indeed, if we think back to the BBC's Charter, Asian Network is vitally important in helping to realize two of the Charter's aims: 'to represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities' and, especially through its music programming, to 'bring the UK to the world and the world to the UK'.

BBC Radio 6 Music is caught in a similar trap. It certainly cannot be accused of not increasing its audience or of being too expensive with a cost per listener hour of 3.4 pence in contrast to 1Xtra's 4.5 pence (Ofcom 2009: 170). It is, however, criticised in the Strategy Review for not having a wide enough reach and for not delivering enough unique listeners to the BBC. So even though the report acknowledges that 6 Music has a passionate fan base, it argues that '[b]oosting its reach so that it achieved appropriate value for money would significantly increase its market impact' (BBC 2010: 39). Yet 6 Music, widely praised for its ability to offer innovative programming to distinct audiences – surely an embodiment of the Charter's requirement to 'stimulate creativity and cultural excellence' – is to be punished for being 'small' even though that is precisely one of the strengths of the public service model: to reach out to both mass and minority audiences in order to recognize common interests as well as distinct identities. 6 Music's innovative remit is recognized even by its commercial competitors who have expressed a desire to see it continue and who do not see it undermining competition in that sector of the market. According to Tony Wadsworth, chairman of the BPI, in a presentation to the BBC Trust, 'BBC 6 Music has significant cultural worth and public value that you can't measure by audience numbers alone, and it provides programming that commercial radio does not' (quoted in Sweney 2010).

It seems that the only way that minority services can be safeguarded, according to the proposals in the Strategy Review, is if they can be 'twinned' with a more popular service:

Radio 7 with Radio 4, BBC4 with BBC2 and 1Xtra with Radio 1. This is a strange logic for a public service broadcaster. Surely a minority audience exists precisely because it may not have an obvious relationship with a majority audience – this does not reduce the ‘value’ of the service offered to the minority audience. Yet because Asian Network has no clear partner and because 6 Music cannot be collapsed into Radio 2 (even though some of its ‘most distinctive programmes’ [BBC 2010: 43] will be transferred to a Radio 2 that is likely to be more speech-focused), the future of these two crucial innovations cannot be preserved.

We also oppose the reduction in the BBC’s online content. Halving the number of ‘top-line directories’ will not make bbc.co.uk more distinctive but less attractive as a starting-off point from which to access a whole range of content, including precisely those areas in which commercial providers are less likely to be interested. This is the point of a public service provider of digital content: to attract users who will then be more likely to browse the website and take advantage of the unique possibilities and non-commercial sites – precisely the ‘public space’ the Director General is so keen to protect. At a time when the internet presence of ‘incumbent’ media organizations is especially vital if they are to secure their influence in a digital future, the decision to cut 25 per cent of the budget for BBC Online is self-defeating: it will prevent the BBC from reacting creatively and productively to online developments as they emerge and will hand the initiative in the key emerging media sector to the BBC’s rivals. We cannot understand how this is good either for the Corporation or for licence fee payers.

Conclusion

Despite the director general’s proposals for cuts and wider public unease with high salaries for senior management across the public and private sector, public confidence remains high with the BBC as an institution and with its programmes. Should the cuts and closures go through, the public is likely not to thank the Director General for his commitment to ‘efficiency’ and securing ‘value for money’ but to feel increasingly uneasy with the prospect of a smaller and more defensive BBC.

To misquote James Murdoch’s vitriolic attack on the BBC, it is not the BBC’s future ambitions that are ‘chilling’ but its *lack* of ambition and, in particular, should the Trust decide to continue with the programme of cuts and closures, its lack of commitment to minority audiences who constitute a vital part of the BBC’s remit. The BBC needs to improve its track record in this area, not to reduce it further.

Bibliography

BBC (2010) ‘BBC Strategy Review’, London: BBC Trust.

Fenton, B. (2008) ‘Cameron attacks “overmighty” BBC’, *FT.com*, 3 November, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9223e09c-a9d5-11dd-958b-000077b07658.html>.

Georgiou, M. (2002) ‘Mapping minorities and their media: The national context – the UK’, available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EMTEL/Minorities/papers/ukreport.pdf>

Glover, J. (2009) 'Public backs under-fire BBC, says poll', *Guardian*, 5 September.

Murdoch, J. (2009) 'The Absence of Trust', 2009 Edinburgh International Television Festival, McTaggart Lecture, 26 August.

Ofcom (2008) *Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review: Phase Two – Preparing for the Digital Future*, London: Ofcom.

Ofcom (2009) *The Communications Market 2009*, London: Ofcom, available at: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/cmr09/>.

Plunkett, J. (2010) 'BBC 6 Music's audience rises 50%', *guardian.co.uk*, 13 May, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/may/13/bbc-6-music-chris-evans-rajars>

Robinson, J. (2008) 'TV ratings: Wallace and Gromit lead BBC to Christmas Day ratings victory', *guardian.co.uk*, 26 December, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/dec/26/wallace-and-gromit-lead-bbc-to-christmas-ratings-victory>.

Sweeney, M. (2010) 'Senior music executives call for 6 Music to be saved', *guardian.co.uk*, 15 April, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/apr/15/save-bbc-6-music>.

Thinkbox (2010) *Thinkbox January-March 2010 Review*, London: Thinkbox, available at: <http://www.thinkbox.tv/server/show/nav.1263>.