



Writers' Guild of Great Britain

Response to Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review – Phase 2: preparing for the digital future

Introduction

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain is a trade union with 2,300 members, representing writers in TV and radio; theatre; film; publishing; video games and multimedia. Something like half of our members are involved in writing for television and radio, and we believe they form the majority of scriptwriters contributing to broadcast drama, comedy and children's programmes in the UK.

There are numerous aspects of PSB such as news, current affairs, arts & culture, educational, factual programming. The Writers' Guild of Great Britain, representing professional writers working in drama, comedy and children's programming, will concentrate on the areas we know best, but we will also say something about how PSB should be funded.

The Writers' Guild is a member of the Performers' Alliance, along with Equity and the Musicians' Union. We are associated with the comments submitted by the Performers' Alliance Parliamentary Group and we wholeheartedly endorse them. However we wish to add some extra comments dealing with our own special areas of interest.

Who should be public service broadcasters?

It is critical that the BBC should remain the cornerstone of PSB in the UK. There is no alternative, short of abandoning PSB altogether. It is highly desirable that the commercial PSBs – ITV, Channel 4 and Five – should continue to perform this function, to provide the choice and competition that will help to keep standards high.

The BBC

For the foreseeable future the BBC should be financed by the licence fee system as it is now. The funding available to the BBC should not be cut, and should be increased annually at least in line with inflation. There is a case for BBC licence fee funding to increase faster than inflation so that the BBC can continue its leading work in researching and developing new technologies – this can be of value to the whole UK broadcasting industry.

The BBC should also keep its unique role in promoting the UK throughout the world, both as a provider of news and as a supplier of distinctive programming.

The BBC should maintain a comprehensive presence on all audiovisual platforms including the internet, freely available to the UK population. We think all its programmes should be available for payment after they have been broadcast and the catch-up period has expired.

The BBC should be entitled to occupy the primary positions on all Electronic Programme Guide systems

Commercial PSBs

ITV, Channel 4 and Five cannot be forced to continue as PSBs, but should be encouraged to do so by various means. They could be allowed subsidised access to free-to-air delivery systems such as Freeview. They could be given tax incentives to make or commission public service programming by a system similar to the tax breaks allowed on UK cinema films. They could benefit from levies imposed on the purchase price of audiovisual equipment and the subscriptions of pay-TV services. They could be guaranteed advantageous positions on EPGs subject to meeting targets and quotas for public service programming. They could be guaranteed the right to televise certain high-profile sporting and entertainment occasions. They could be guaranteed a certain level of Government-funded public service advertising. We would not be opposed in principle to direct funding from general taxation, but we feel this is not realistic in the present economic climate.

The combined value of all these privileges would be significant, but would be strictly conditional on meeting PSB requirements which could be set by Ofcom with legislative force.

We are painfully conscious of the precarious state of ITV and the urgent need of Channel 4 for certainty about future funding. ITV could be swallowed up any day and ultimately disappear as a PSB; C4 could lose its way within only a couple of years. Direct subsidy seems impossible, so we believe only some combination of these ideas can realistically keep the idea of commercial PSBs alive.

Drama and comedy

Any definition of PSB must extend to high-quality UK-originated drama and comedy programming. The dramatisation of classic literature has been a distinctive element of UK broadcasting since the earliest days and must be encouraged to continue. Likewise high-quality original drama. This is among the most expensive television to produce. It is vital that the BBC is adequately funded to continue to produce this level of material, and it should be among the obligations of commercial PSBs.

There is also a strong tradition of excellent soap operas, police and hospital series, detective dramas, etc. These should and will continue because of their enormous popularity. They deliver large viewing figures to advertisers and value for money to licence fee payers.

While we are fortunate to have a strong and innovative independent production sector, it is important that the BBC and ITV retain the in-house ability and expertise to produce a large proportion of both these types of shows for themselves.

This is where skills can be learnt and improved and is the obvious arena for job-based training that will benefit the entire broadcasting industry. Therefore there could be some relaxation of the present very high quota requirements for independent production in these areas.

Comedy programming – in particular family-appeal sitcoms – is another traditional bulwark of UK broadcasting, but has weakened in recent years because of the damaging consequences of making expensive shows that turn out not to be hits. This needs to be factored in to the obligations on PSBs.

Children's programming

Most children spend a lot of time in front of the television, and we must be crazy if we do not want them to benefit from programmes that are original, entertaining, stimulating and educational. It is deplorable that the BBC is now the only broadcaster providing significant original UK-based children's programming. We have already slipped too far and Ofcom must take responsibility for getting us back on the right track.

It must be a core function of the BBC to continue to provide children's programming of the highest quality. It must once again be a key obligation of commercial PSBs. While it is reasonable to have controls on advertising, we should not be over-squeamish.

Specialised children's channels have their place, but the main general channels of all PSBs should always have high-quality children's programmes in the mix.

Radio

We would like to mention radio, as we believe it is a vital part of public service broadcasting. With the failure of private sector initiatives – the latest and saddest being Channel 4's plans – from the Writers' Guild's perspective the only show in town is the BBC, specifically Radio 4, Radio 7 and Radio 3. It is tragic that the cuts panic at the BBC has been indiscriminately extended to all radio budgets, even though radio is produced extremely cheaply and efficiently, and the entire cost of BBC radio is a small fraction of the corporation's overall budget. The cuts are deeply damaging and should be reversed immediately.

Specific proposals

We do not agree with any suggestion of "top-slicing" – i.e. taking part of the licence fee income away from the BBC and giving it to commercial PSBs. Robbing Peter to pay Paul will not lead to any overall improvement in broadcasting services. We have a clear and transparent system in which the BBC is funded by the licence fee and the commercial PSBs are funded by advertising. Everybody understands this and most people accept it. We should not muddy the waters. The BBC is already under pressure because the real value of the licence fee is being eroded and huge property development and relocation proposals are too far advanced to be cut back. Programme making is subject to damaging cuts and this situation must not be made worse.

We see no merit in taking away part or all of BBC Worldwide from the BBC. The profits of BBCW are reinvested in programmes, and the need for this has incentivised BBCW to great successes in maximising the income derived from BBC programmes, particularly through overseas sales.

There is little or no advantage to PSB in slicing the cake slightly differently when what we obviously need is a bigger cake.

Why do so many people hate the BBC?

There is a fashionable trend today for many politicians and commentators to attack the size and reach of the BBC. It is accused of monopoly tactics, market distortion and unfair competition. Therefore, it is argued, it should be drastically reduced in size, restricted in the types of programmes it broadcasts, removed from the internet, etc.

The people who advocate such vandalism cannot have watched TV in such countries as Canada, Australia or New Zealand, all of which originally modelled their PSB on the UK BBC model, but have subsequently chosen to depart from it. They have lived to regret doing so. Programmes are constantly interrupted by lengthy commercial breaks (much worse than on UK commercial PSBs). The schedules are dominated by American (and to some extent UK) imports because there is so little home-made programming, and what remains is often of inferior quality. Television has ceased to function as the binding agent of a nation's personality and self-view, and while it may entertain at a certain level, it struggles to inform and fails to educate.

We have a choice now whether to support the BBC and allow it to develop into the digital age, or to let it decline from a combination of financial starvation and hypercriticism until it is past recovery. Once we have lost our BBC the very voices that are now loudest in demanding its destruction will cry out in the audiovisual desert that is left behind.

Manufacturing industry has been decimated; shipbuilding, mining and steelmaking have disappeared; construction is grinding to a halt; the railways are in chaos; the financial services industry has an uncertain future, or perhaps no future. Public service broadcasting – and in particular the BBC – is one of the last areas in which we can truly be said to lead the world. Today it is at risk as never before. If we allow public service broadcasting to collapse, the only activity left in which Britain excels will be in waging foreign wars.

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