

## CHAPTER 12

# Creating a sustainable future for the BBC: the importance of public deliberation during and beyond Charter Review

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The BBC is acutely aware of how it must serve a diverse and sometimes divided public today, while operating in a challenging and dynamic environment. First, responding to technological change and the accompanying fragmentation of audiences, it must ensure it reaches and remains relevant to everyone, providing services and content that cater to the needs of diverse groups and increasingly personalising our media experiences.<sup>1</sup> Second, and noting how the fragmentation of media use may compound division and polarisation, the BBC aims to be a centripetal force, bringing the public together through 'shared values' and 'shared moments'.<sup>2</sup>

The BBC's strategy for the first objective includes significant investment in engaging with their changing audiences about perceptions of its delivery, including the quality and trustworthiness of news, the diversity of content, and the degree to which the BBC represents and serves their interests. For the second objective, audiences need to be engaged in ways that connect to their identity as members of a public, in order to recognise what could be collectively shared and valued about the BBC.

The 'public' is not a fixed entity, but emerges as people engage with each other as members of a community and discuss topics of collective concern.<sup>3</sup> The starting point for identifying what it is about the BBC that can be shared and valued—and could thus form the basis of the BBC's relationship with the public in a new Royal Charter—is to facilitate and foster deliberation among the BBC's audiences, and use their outcomes to develop policy and practice.

We draw on our research with members of the public about public service media, to show the value of fostering greater deliberative engagement about the BBC. In common with Ofcom's and the BBC's own analysis, participants in our study recognised and supported the distinctive role of the BBC. They also understood the challenges the BBC faces, especially in demonstrating political independence and impartiality in a more polarised political environment, and in defining what the 'public good' might mean in the context of an increasingly diverse population. Their deliberations with each other allowed them to engage with a range of perspectives about the Corporation that extended their understanding of the role it can play, as well as how their own views may be challenged or supported by others. In the process, they referred not only to their own individual concerns, but also to the wider interests and values of the communities and society of which they are a part. We argue that it is in this recognition of one's role as a member of a wider community, which is facilitated by deliberative engagement, that people identify what can be collectively shared and valued about the Corporation, and the BBC's 'public' comes into being.

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1 BBC, (2024). A BBC for the Future, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/documents/a-bbc-for-the-future.pdf>>

2 Ibid.

3 Barnett, C. (2008), 'Convening publics: the parasitical spaces of public action', in K. Cox, M. Low & J. Robinson (eds.), *The Handbook of Political Geography*, pp. 403-417. London: Sage.

Adopting this kind of deliberative approach also has consequences for the way public engagement and public reaction to the BBC is usually conceptualised, changing it from a ‘supplier–audience’ relationship to one based on ‘partnership’. While the ‘supplier–audience’ relationship is likely to prompt transactional forms of engagement, a partnership expands the range and expectations of engagement as an exchange between equals about debates critical to the BBC’s legitimacy. The quality of the public’s partnership with the Corporation thus depends not only on their satisfaction as audiences, but also on the degree to which they feel their voices in these broader debates are heard.

We draw from findings from an online citizens’ assembly with 46 members of the public as part of Ofcom’s 2020 review of public service broadcasting, ‘Small Screen: Big Debate’.<sup>4</sup> The assembly gave participants time and space to engage in an extended process of public deliberation about public service media in the UK, where they reflected together on its purpose and role, becoming more aware of arguments for and against particular positions.<sup>5</sup> While the study was not specifically about the BBC, as the largest and most prominent public service media organisation, it featured prominently in the discussions and was often the exemplar that participants used to illustrate their points.

Below, we briefly describe how participants understood both the value of the BBC for the public today, and the challenges it faces,<sup>6</sup> before presenting our recommendations.

## The BBC’s value

Because the BBC is publicly funded and serves public purposes explicitly, our participants viewed their relationship with it differently than private, commercial media. Several participants noted how they valued its accountability to the public:

you hear it kind of every so often, there’s like an incident where a news presenter said something slightly wrong and, and the audience called into Ofcom and complained. Like, there’s that aspect of we can do something about it which I don’t really see with the channels like Sky or with Netflix. (P6G3)

As the following quote shows, this accountability is connected to its status as a ‘public service’, which offers certain privileges (public funding, for example), but also involves obligations towards a collective ‘public’.

They’re public in the sense that they get public money, they’ve got some public ... duties and responsibilities. (P3G5)

Participants’ sense of these obligations was reflected when, in the final session of the assembly, they were asked to assess the importance of the different ideas and aspects of public service media identified in their prior discussions. The rankings revealed a range of things that they valued and felt were important for meeting ‘public’ obligations. The highest ranked were universal access, independence, diverse content, programming that might not be commercially viable (e.g., science, arts, children’s programming), diversity (onscreen and ‘behind the scenes’, in commissioning and production), and ‘informing’ the public through trusted news. Some participants viewed the latter as ‘more important than ever’ (P3G6) in the context of concerns about misinformation and disinformation.

4 Edwards, L. & Moss, G. (2020), Debating the Future of Public Service Broadcasting: Results of an Online Citizens’ Assembly. London: Ofcom. <<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-1-10-weeks/208895-future-of-psb/supporting-docs/psb-lse-citizens-assembly-report.pdf?v=367735>>; Moss, G. & Edwards, L. (2024), ‘Public deliberation and the justification of public service media’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 31(3): 322–37, doi:10.1080/10286632.2024.2342277.

5 Participants were highly engaged with the topic of public service media. While their agreement to participate suggests that they already had opinions to share, the detailed reflections they offered tallied with other deliberative research, in confirming that the public are both willing to engage in and capable of understanding debates about media policy that affect their daily lives.

6 Quotes are attributed by participant and group—for example, P6G5 indicates participant 6 in group 5.

## The BBC's challenges

Participants also ranked very highly the importance of regularly reviewing the purpose and objectives of public service media in light of changing contexts. Indeed, their deliberations showed they were acutely aware of the BBC's complex environment and the challenges it faced in delivering the things they valued.

Ensuring and demonstrating independence and impartiality in today's more politically contested environment, is one such challenge. Some participants, for example, felt that the BBC was close to political and economic elites, and this potentially compromised its ability to serve the public (e.g., by being truly diverse, or truly independent).<sup>7</sup>

The BBC are a step closer to the public than the likes of Sky ... but it's kind of double-edged ... you think 'It's so close to the political elite. Is something going on?' (P3G5).

To maintain public trust in this context, participants stressed the need for transparency.

[I]n order to trust it you need a bit more transparency. ... So that all would come under, like transparency and trust, because I guess, half the, half the battle in a way of trust is not knowing what's going on. So if you don't know what's going on behind the scenes, then you're less likely to trust it, the public broadcasting. (P4G7)

Participants also emphasised the need for more public engagement and input into BBC operations and decision-making, to ensure accountability to the public rather than elite groups.

I would like to see more of that—so I think there should be some kind of mechanism for, you know, allowing ideas in from the public, which BBC seem to be very—and other broadcasters as well, they're very closed. (P1G4)

The BBC may feel it is already engaging sufficiently with the public. It conducts extensive market research to understand its audiences, while also responding to individual feedback and complaints.<sup>8</sup> Yet such efforts are not necessarily visible to those who do not directly participate in them. Our participants emphasised the need for greater engagement in a way that ensures they feel seen and heard by the corporation:

People want to be heard, want to be seen, people want to be included, but not just to be fobbed off ... there needs to be a taking on board, a visible, clear, reportable and transparent taking on board. ... [E]xplain themselves, so people do feel actually heard. [P3G1]

A second challenge is how to define the 'public good' given the diversity of the UK, and particularly in terms of making choices about producing content that reflects shared cultural values and identity or which is educational or otherwise beneficial.

P6G2: So when they say we represent, like, British values or British content, you know, I find it difficult to support a claim like that, you know? Because what is Britain? What is British?

P4G4: I think one of the challenges of, one of the roles of public service broadcasting is to present the stuff that we might not necessarily choose for ourselves or which is, in some way, beneficial for us. But there is a question in a diverse British population, who decides what is good for us?

The comments here are couched not in terms of satisfying individual preferences for content—which can be identified through market research about behaviour and preferences—but in identifying a collective benefit that the BBC can serve. The comments are also questions, not

7 See, for example, Freedman, D. (2019). "Public service" and the journalism crisis: is the BBC the answer?, *Television & New Media*, 20(3): 203–18, doi:10.1177/1527476418760985.

8 See BBC Our Audiences, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/documents/ara-24-25-our-audiences.pdf>>

solutions: participants recognised this as a fundamental, but fraught issue, and explored it during their discussions. Through discussions, they were starting the process of crafting a language and vision for a future BBC that could be genuinely shared and valued by a diverse public in the contemporary context—a foundation for its future legitimacy.

## Recommendations

In a complex and challenging environment, the BBC's relationship with the public must stand on a firm footing. Yet, as our research demonstrated, the BBC's public is not a fixed, pre-existing entity, but something which 'comes into being through a process of intersubjective encounter'.<sup>9</sup> To deliver a new Royal Charter that is legitimate and sustainable, we argue that the government and the BBC need to invest in bringing the BBC's public into being and incorporating them into the process of Charter development, as well as ongoing governance. This can only be done through deliberative engagement that facilitates reflection on their shared interests and values related to the BBC, alongside their individual preferences about its activities.

Deliberation is essential to these processes, because it enables participants to share their perspectives, reflect on their differences, and identify what is collectively valued about the Corporation. It can also contribute to a more meaningful democratic structure for the BBC, where people feel that engagement is authentic, ensuring they feel genuinely seen and heard. Below we set out a number of principles for using deliberation during the Charter Review and beyond, as part of the BBC's development of a new relationship with its public.

First, the public recognise that the challenges faced by the BBC are complex, but their desire to be involved includes engaging with this complexity, and the Charter Review is a unique opportunity to incorporate their insights as a new foundation for the BBC is developed. Therefore, our first recommendation is that there be meaningful deliberative consultation with the public about the terms of the new BBC Charter.

Second, the agenda for these deliberations should be open-ended, and allow opportunities for participants to explore new ways of being involved in the BBC's operations. Regardless of the form it takes, where the new Charter recommends public involvement in BBC governance structures, it should be comprehensive, independent, and have a clear impact on decision-making.

Third, we recommend that the BBC's relationship with its public needs to be reframed as a genuine partnership, where public expectations of an ongoing engagement with the Corporation are met, greater transparency and trust are evident, and public accountability is direct, rather than mediated through the regulator or government. To this end, we recommend regular citizens' assemblies are run across the UK's regions and nations, specifically to consider strategic, operational, and governance challenges and decisions facing the BBC. The frequency and scope of these assemblies should be a topic for public consultation in the Charter Review.

Fourth, we note that to be effective, deliberation has to be consequential—that is, participants need to see how their contributions are making a tangible difference. We therefore recommend that Ofcom uses the outcomes of citizens' assemblies to set out public expectations of the BBC and evaluate its performance.

We recognise that public engagement efforts adopted by organisations and public bodies have not always produced a genuinely deliberative, reflective conversation that ensures outcomes are viewed as legitimate. Nonetheless, done well, we argue that deliberation can provide a strong basis for a new partnership between the BBC and its public. Certain parameters are necessary.<sup>10</sup>

9 Blumler, J. & Coleman, S. (2021), 'After the crisis: a new "normal" for democratic citizenship?', *Javnost—The Public*, 28(1): 3–19, doi:10.1080/13183222.2021.1883884.

10 Edwards, L. & Moss, G. (2020), *Consultation design and evaluation toolkit*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/images/Improving-deliberation-improving-copyright/FINAL-Policy-Consultation-Design-and-Evaluation-Toolkit-New.pdf>>

agendas should be wide-ranging and align with public priorities; participants must have access to information about the topics they discuss so that their input is adequately informed; deliberation should be inclusive, including under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Where needed, citizens' assemblies should be complemented by methods such as community outreach, online participatory platforms, and interviews/focus groups with targeted populations, to ensure all views are represented. Finally, as noted above, deliberation must be consequential, so that the public understand the process they are engaging with and the difference their participation makes.

Achieving meaningful deliberation with the public, at scale, is not easy, and work done in other countries could inform the approach here. But there is no reason why regular, large-scale conversations with members of the public should not be part of new systems of consultation and governance. Given the challenges that the BBC faces, we argue that public deliberation is essential to ensure the future of the Corporation as a public service media organisation that is respected, valued, and legitimate in the eyes of its public.