

## Autumn conference 2016 Update

### BACK TO THE FUTURE:WHAT NEXT FOR VIEWERS AND LISTENERS?

#### VLV's 33rd Annual Autumn Conference

Wednesday 23 November 2016

The recent Voice of the Listener and Viewer conference, *Back to the Future: What Next for Viewers and Listeners?*, held at the Geological Society looked at what might be in store for audiences over the next decade.

With the ink not yet dry on the draft BBC Charter and the operating model of Channel 4 still under scrutiny inside the DCMS, we focused our two morning sessions on these two broadcasters.

#### **BBC: the next chapter**

Lord Hall of Birkenhead CBE, Director-General of the BBC, was our keynote speaker. He highlighted how the BBC purposes in the new Charter will underpin all the BBC does.



Lord Hall highlighted recent BBC successes, such as the domestic abuse storyline in the *Archers*, *Planet Earth II* and *War and Peace*, but also that the BBC is going through a period of reform following the Savile inquiry and the cutting of its budget.

He thanked VLV members for making their voices heard during the Government's BBC Green Paper consultation to which 192,000 people responded, most of them supporting the BBC and its mission.

In his speech Lord Hall set out five ways in which he believes the BBC should measure its future impact and gauge its success. These were fulfilling a traditional mission in the digital age, providing something good for everyone, being a trusted voice in a crowded arena, bringing the country together, and defining Britain's identity on both a local and global basis.

While he welcomed the enhancement which digital tools bring to allow the BBC to have a two-way conversation with its audiences, he stressed that in the current 'post-truth' digital era where it is more difficult to know whether news is accurate,

the BBC has an even more important role to play than ever in providing audiences with impartial, accurate news.

#### **Channel 4: The options to ensure a sustainable future**

The second session of the morning focused on Channel 4 with VLV's President, Dame Colette Bowe, chairing a session with Dan Brooke, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer at Channel 4 Corporation (C4C), Steve Morrison, the Founder of All3Media and journalist Maggie Brown.

While rumours of the privatisation of C4C had died down over the Summer, they were recently reignited when the Secretary of State made it clear before the Culture, Media and Sport committee earlier in October that privatisation is still very much an option and she is hoping to come to a decision 'in the near future'. In light of this we decided we should hold a panel to debate whether the concerns about Channel 4's sustainability justified a change in its model.

VLV considers that C4C plays a very important role in the UK's PSB mixed broadcasting ecology, cross-subsidising PSB content from the income derived by more commercial content. It supports the independent production industry; and it provides a range of content which often provides an alternative view to mainstream PSB channels.



Dan Brooke made it clear that Channel 4 is financially sustainable with its cross-funding model whereby the production of PSB content, such as Channel 4 News, is supported by more commercial content. Creatively he said Channel 4 is thriving and ratings were up on C4 last year, as were revenues which were the highest they have ever been and spend on UK programmes were also the highest they have ever been. He spoke also about the recent success of the Rio Paralympic games and about Channel 4 leading on diversity. He said Channel 4 is perplexed about why the Government continues to ask about the sustainability of the corporation. He highlighted that many others, including Ofcom, support them in maintaining their existing model.



Maggie Brown, who is currently writing her second instalment of the history of Channel 4, said that the corporation could be vulnerable because of its reliance on advertising and because it doesn't own its own intellectual property because it is a publisher broadcaster. However, its success with its digital channels has buoyed it up. It

has a sharp commercial brain and, on balance, its sustainability is probably OK.

Steve Morrison highlighted that we have an amazing broadcasting system in the UK and that Channel 4 is extraordinary because we have created a thriving industry in Britain which produces content about the UK from a multitude of perspectives. He strongly opposed any proposals that Channel 4 should make its own content in-house. This would undermine the ecology of UK broadcasting and the existence of independent production companies.

## **Views on the future of public service broadcasting**

The afternoon began with a panel discussion with three Peers who have all been very active in recent debates about the BBC. Lord Inglewood, former Conservative Minister in the Department of National Heritage and Chairman of the Lords Communications Committee, Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury, current member of the Communications Committee and Liberal Democrat spokesperson in the Lords on Culture, Media and Sport, and Lord Stevenson of Balmacara, Labour spokesperson in the Lords on Culture, Media and Sport.



While there were warnings from the panel of the risk of people viewing content online and the unreliability of such content, they all passionately sang the praises of public service broadcasting in the UK. Lord Inglewood expressed concerns about the buoyancy of the advertising market, Lord Stevenson stressed that we need to avoid political interference in public service broadcasting and we may not win the battle next time round when the BBC's Charter is next up for renewal. There was also discussion of Channel 4's future and Baroness Bonham Carter highlighted that the Communications Committee supported Channel 4's existing operating model. They suggested that VLV should keep making the case that the process of negotiating the BBC budget should be more transparent. Baroness Bonham Carter proposed that Ofcom should be involved in the setting of the BBC budget. There was a debate on the meaning and implications of 'distinctiveness' in the new BBC Charter, with the conclusion being that it is an 'unfortunate' and 'unnecessary' word to have in the BBC's mission. The session closed with a discussion about whether the new governance and regulation model of the BBC will maintain accountability to licence fee payers.

## **The challenges and opportunities of a digital future**

Panel discussion with Jonathan Thompson, CEO of Digital UK, Lindsey Clay, CEO of Thinkbox, journalist Bill Thompson and Mathew Horsman, Director of Mediatique.



The afternoon concluded with a panel of experts discussing the potential and challenges of a digital future. It was clear from Jonathan Thompson's and

Lindsey Clay's presentations that free to air television viewing remains remarkably robust, with more than 90% of people still watching TV live or recorded. Jonathan noted that four shows in the past two weeks had topped 10 million viewers which, for him, implies that free to air TV is live and well. This is all despite Amazon Prime and Netflix paying out significant budgets for drama and factual. He believes the technological revolution has already occurred – most of us have tablets, smartphones and many have video on demand subscriptions. It is surprising that young people are still watching live TV when there is so much else to distract them.

Lindsay Clay echoed much of what Jonathan Thompson said, pointing out that for ¾ of us TV is still the most popular form of entertainment. Even among younger audiences, TV is still the most popular platform despite their increased uptake of other technologies. She highlighted that the TV advertising market has been impacted by the Brexit vote, but on a positive note said that TV's share of advertising revenue has remained very flat over the past three decades because TV is still the most powerful platform for advertisers with incredible reach and a lot of time spent.



Matthew Horsman did not think that new technology will kill off traditional public service broadcasting. He pointed out that we have been predicting the death of live TV for decades, but that it is very much still thriving. He warned we should all be very careful of data released by new tech companies. He said he thinks we will still be watching live TV in 2030, but he is concerned about how it will be funded.

Bill Thompson was passionate about the ability of new technology to transform our lives. He posed a warning to TV executives to not ignore the opportunities of new technology if they want to ensure they deliver benefits to society via public service content. He wants to see some of the traditional thinking about public service providers to be challenged because too much TV is half-hearted when it tries to be interactive. New possibilities will continue to emerge and we must take advantage of those opportunities to make sure that citizens, users, listeners and viewers benefit from public service broadcasting.

### **VLV Events in 2017**

#### **Jocelyn Hay Lecture**

We are delighted that Lord Puttnam has agreed to deliver the 2017 Jocelyn Hay Lecture at 7pm on March 21<sup>st</sup>. The event will be held in Central London. Booking details will be available nearer the time.

#### **VLV Spring Conference 2017**

VLV's Spring Conference and Awards for Excellence in broadcasting will be held on Wednesday April 26<sup>th</sup> at the Geological Society in Piccadilly between 10.30 am and 4.30pm.

**VLV Autumn Conference 2017**

VLV's Autumn Conference 2017 will be held on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> November 2017 at the Geological Society in Piccadilly between 10.30am and 4.30pm.