

*“Working for quality  
and diversity in  
British broadcasting”*



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## **Voice of the Listener and Viewer Response to the BBC Trust Reviews of BBC 1, BBC 2, BBC4 and the Red Button Service**

*Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British Broadcasting system.*

The Voice of the listener and Viewer (VLV) is pleased to respond to this review. Following an introduction we comment on each of the services in turn.

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### **Confidentiality statement**

No part of this response is confidential.

Robert Clark  
Board Member of VLV and contact for this response

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# Voice of the Listener and Viewer Response to the BBC Trust Reviews of BBC 1, BBC 2, BBC4 and the Red Button Service

## INTRODUCTION

Voice of the Listener & Viewer believes that the BBC remains a unique cultural institution that is greatly admired in the UK and around the world. Through its programmes and services it provides a range of fascinating material to inform, educate and entertain the listener and viewer. VLV also believes that the Licence Fee is still the best way to sustain the BBC's independence, important not just to broadcasting but to democracy itself. It is from this standpoint that VLV makes its Response to the BBC Trust reviews.

VLV considers the BBC to be the best guarantor of high quality public service broadcasting in the UK. Not only does it make good programmes, it sets a quality standard to which commercial broadcasters aspire – or at least have done so in the past. Now, as ITV cuts budgets and seeks to abandon or drastically reduce its public service obligations, it is all the more important that the BBC upholds high standards in the new digital world.

VLV is a strong supporter of the BBC when it makes good programmes, but ready to be an equally strong critic of the Corporation when it does not. We are therefore pleased to respond to the BBC Trust Reviews of BBC 1, BBC 2, BBC 4, and the Red Button Service: it has given us an opportunity to think hard about the quality of these channels and services, and to ask ourselves how good they now are.

In summary, BBC 1 is seen to be meeting a very wide and demanding remit. As the authors of this particular Response put it, 'The full remit for BBC1 seems to us to be beyond the scope even of Renaissance Europe...As viewers, it seems to us that BBC 1, on the whole, with obvious variations over time, meets these challenging targets reasonably effectively'.

BBC 4, the relatively new digital channel, receives more enthusiastic support. 'BBC 4 is a distillation of the BBC mission. It can be compared to a vast library which is life-enriching'. 'It is my regular channel. It is as close as any other service to meeting the ideals and values of public service broadcasting'.

BBC 2 provokes a more critical response. Although 'VLV believes that, compared with the alternatives, BBC 2 still provides value for money'...There is a feeling 'that the channel has gone down-market, and has perhaps moved away from its original high ideals'.

This concern that quality may have been slipping is reflected in the responses individual VLV members have sent to the BBC Trust, with a copy to VLV.

'Generally, cultural and presentation standards have fallen dramatically in the last 20 years.' 'Particularly good are documentaries, drama – though not enough – and natural history. Not good are current comedy shows, makeover shows, reality shows'.

While some say that the Red Button service is 'usually good', others find it 'distracting', and still more don't use it at all.

'Not very good at new ideas' is a frequent theme. 'Some programmes like *Strictly Come Dancing* are very tired'. 'In entertainment the BBC should not try to squeeze too much out of a successful format'.

'BBC news is falling down over coverage of politics and social conditions in Europe, east and west. BBC correspondents in these places are underused, while minor US stories take their place'. News is 'sometimes a bit superficial. Harrowing film of the dead doesn't tell you things like where do the Taliban get their weapons from?' 'News is dumbed down too much with graphics that are silly and distracting'.

Some viewers accuse the BBC of abandoning high quality for high audience figures. 'The BBC should be above the ratings chase; quality rather than numbers watching should be the aim'. 'There is a general dumbing down. 'Don't forget that there is still an educated, sophisticated audience who have an attention span above 30 seconds, and would appreciate deeper, more intellectually stimulating programmes'.

It is perhaps to be expected that individual viewers moved to write in response to the BBC Trust questionnaire should be critical, but this sense of dissatisfaction with a BBC perceived to be too often abandoning the highest programme standards in pursuit of ratings should not be ignored. Nor should these critics be written off as old-fashioned and out of date. The number of older people in the population is growing: it would be foolish for the BBC Trust to think that their views can safely be discounted.

Their criticisms made, these VLV members are among the BBC's most loyal viewers. 'The BBC is a fantastic national institution – please look after it'.

Voice of the Listener & Viewer urges the BBC Trust to redouble its efforts to do so.

# Response Voice of the Listener & Viewer to the BBC Trust Review of BBC 1

## BACKGROUND

1. BBC 1's remit is to be the BBC's most popular mixed-genre television service across the UK, offering a wide range of high quality programmes, and acting as the primary medium for major UK and international events. Given that this reflects the fundamental requirement of the BBC to 'inform, educate, and entertain'; and that BBC 1 should be available for 24 hours a day, this is a huge challenge for the service.
2. The BBC Trust Review focuses on the degree to which licence fee payers are aware of and using the service, and the extent of its appeal to a wide range of demographic groups.

## Comments on scheduling

1. Week-ends. BBC 1 is clearly identified as the television service with wide-ranging appeal for family viewing. A Saturday schedule which includes the Lord Mayor's Show, an afternoon of sport followed in the evening by *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Casualty* with news slots at regular intervals seems to fulfil the remit. The Sunday schedule features two political shows (*Andrew Marr* and *The Politics Show*) with the evening featuring *Doctor Who*, *Antiques Road Show* and *Garrow's Law* – again a wide range of genres.
2. Overnight. The requirement for BBC 1 to operate throughout the night (Midnight to 0600) is presently achieved through some variable scheduling. Some repeats, almost continuous news and current affairs The overnight programmes of course provide a news service, and it is also an opportunity to show some of the best repeats. However it is not clear from the weekly overnight schedule who the target audience is.
3. Schedule awareness. It would require a focused survey to establish how aware licence fee payers are of the various sources of information about the schedules. However, the TV listings are very widely promulgated through the press, and electronic programme guides and are available on the internet.

## Responses to specific questions

### 1. How well is BBC1 performing against the terms of its licence?

#### (i) To what extent are licence fee payers aware of and using the services, and are some demographic groups better served than others?

From general knowledge of audience ratings it would seem that, in general, BBC1 is holding up well in terms of its share of the TV audience in an increasingly competitive environment. It helps that it is at the top of the programme listings on digital TV EPGs, and VLV considers that that should continue.

It would be of interest to track the reach and ratings of programmes originated on BBC1 when they are repeated on other channels. Again, we suspect that there is a great deal of repeat viewing of BBC1 originated material. This is another indicator of the channel's importance and influence, as are sales of boxed sets and DVDs and other programme-related material.

#### Comments on demographic groups

There is a gap in provision for older children and young teens which has been identified by a number of reports and studies (see e.g. Carter et al, 2009). The other issue is the over- or under-representation in programmes of certain groups, such as older women, some regional accents (for some reason, Welsh and Northern Irish seem to be particularly favoured), and ethnic minorities. An apparent recent example of this discrimination is the sacking of Arlene Phillips from *Strictly Come Dancing*, when the male stars of the show (two of whom who are much older than her) remained. The under-representation of older people (particularly, but not exclusively, women) has been an issue for a long time, and it is not a trivial one. BBC1, as a mass channel aimed at all demographic groups, should be more sensitive to the issue than niche channels need to be.

#### Are the services delivering high quality and distinctive content across the full range of television genres?

The full remit for BBC1 seems to us to be beyond the scope even of Renaissance Europe! It has to sustain citizenship; stimulate creativity; promote education and learning and provide news round the clock in a variety of formats. It must provide both contemporary and classic drama in a variety of genres. Its schedule must include 'coverage of natural history, history and science, documentary, leisure, social action and religious output. It should bring music and arts programmes to mainstream audiences, some of them in peak time. Together with BBC 2, it should offer children's programmes at convenient times for analogue viewers.' (BBC1 Service Licence, July 2009, pp 2-3).

All this BBC 1 must do within a variety of legal and statutory requirements and constraints, including fluctuations in the purchasing power of the licence fee. We are not in a position to comment on the management, commissioning and production processes of the BBC in any detail (although we have usually been impressed by the individual producers we have met and worked with). As viewers, it seems to us that BBC1 on the whole, with obvious variations over time, meets these challenging targets reasonably effectively. Arts programming could be boosted: since the *South Bank Show* is now being cancelled by ITV, BBC1 should be the channel which steps in to fill this gap.

**Drama:** at the moment there is a trend for fantasy (*Dr. Who* etc.) and spy/thrillers (*Spooks*), and the American trend for long-form series has certainly taken hold here. But these trends do reflect the cultural zeitgeist (cinema is similar) and one would expect BBC1 to be part of it. However, it would be good to see more contemporary political drama – could David Hare be persuaded to write a series?

**Comedy** is always variable and inherently slower to take hold than many other genres, Some respondents feel that we could do with fewer ‘blokey’ panel shows – they’re funny but can sometimes feel like being stuck behind a mouthy group of lads on the football terraces.

A good example of how small-scale shows can ‘grow’ from a minority channel (BBC3) to a less minority channel (BBC2) and now to BBC1 (as recommended in the remit), is *Gavin and Stacey*. This show hits a number of buttons in terms of its demographics; it’s original; it is funny; and it has nurtured new talent. It is to be hoped that this process can be repeated with other shows.

**Children’s:** children’s television has traditionally been a microcosm of adult schedules, with the full range of genres, plus some of its own (e.g. animation; comedy-fantasy). The section on children’s is rather thrown-away – it is not formally part of this Review - and does not address the need for diversity and plurality for this audience – which will be tomorrow’s adult audience. BBC1 needs to be kept on its toes about this.

**(ii) Are the services making an effective contribution to delivering the BBC’s public purposes?**

Yes, certainly, despite inevitable gaps from time to time

**(iii) Are the services delivering good value for money?**

In terms of delivering both cultural and economic value to the whole population, regardless of class, race or age, VLV considers the BBC Licence fee to be the best value for money that has ever been devised. We refer to Professor Patrick Barwise’s writings on this question. (2004)

**2. Is BBC1 equipped to meet its service licence commitments?**

We are not in a position to answer this in terms of the BBC’s internal strategies etc. However, it is important to stress that these enormous and diverse commitments - for BBC1 in particular.....cannot be met without the assured income provided by the licence fee. No organization could promise to deliver this range of services to the whole population without guaranteed financial security and the longer-term commissioning capacity that goes with it. Certainly the service licence commitments of BBC1 are beyond the range of any commercial broadcasting organization.

**3. Should the licence commitments be changed?**

No. The only way they could be changed would be to reduce the commitment to diversity, plurality, quality and public service, and this would be against the whole principle and ethos of the BBC, particularly BBC1. The financial security provided by the licence fee will need to be preserved for these commitments to continue to be met.

## **ANNEX: BBC1 IN THE NATIONS: Northern Ireland.**

*Comments from VLV Board member Maire Messenger Davies (living and working in County Derry/Londonderry for the past five years)*

The BBC operates within a politically and culturally delicate, and contested, national situation in Northern Ireland. It is instructive to compare the remits for Wales and Scotland, which emphasize coverage of Welsh and Scottish history, culture and heritage, with the remit for Northern Ireland, which does not refer to 'Irish culture and history', or even 'Northern Irish culture and history', at all. Special emphasis is rightly laid on news coverage, impartiality and full coverage of local elections, but little on cultural identity, though there is some Irish language programming.

Within this difficult situation, the BBC in Northern Ireland does a very effective job – and it does actually manage to cover history, heritage and other issues in a way which both recognizes the commonalities with the Republic, and acknowledges the current, special constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the UK. An example is an enjoyable, and informative, travel series shown during the autumn of 2009 called *Around Ireland in 80 Days*.

It is a tribute to the respect with which the BBC's Northern Ireland news coverage is viewed in Ireland as a whole that BBC Northern Ireland's local bulletin, *Newsline*, won the Irish Film and Television Academy award for best news coverage in 2007. BBC Northern Ireland programmes are regularly honoured by IFTA. Programmes like *Hearts and Minds* with tough, knowledgeable but still-courteous interviewers such as Noel Thompson and Mark Carruthers deal with the often-contentious issues and characters of local politics in a way that broadcasters on the main UK channels could learn much from.

It's good that comedy is specified as part of BBC Northern Ireland's remit, and I wish to pay special tribute to *Give My Head Peace* (1998 – 2008). In its own inimitable way, this programme deals with culture, history, politics and national identity in Northern Ireland, with few concessions to anybody's sensitivities, in a way that nobody else has managed to do. There is nothing like it anywhere else on British television.

# Voice of the Listener & Viewer Response to the BBC Trust Review of BBC 2

## HOW IS BBC 2 PERFORMING AGAINST THE TERMS OF ITS SERVICE LICENCE?

BBC 2 continues to satisfy many of the requirements of a high quality public service broadcaster. This exercise, however, has made us understand why there is some dissatisfaction with the BBC and its programming. Our comments are based on some intensive viewing over what has been a limited period; so this snapshot may not be fully representative of what is available over a longer period.

## GENERAL OBSERVATION

There is a feeling among some viewers and indeed critics that the channel has gone down-market and has perhaps moved away from its original high ideals. As will be discussed later, provision in certain programme areas, notably serious drama and classical music, is now regarded as unsatisfactory. It is also difficult to see how some “reality shows” such as *The Restaurant* come under the BBC 2 remit. It has been remarked that, in many ways, BBC 4 is the new BBC 2. There seems to be a markedly reduced distinction between BBC 1 and BBC 2, although it is explicit in Part 11 (Contribution to Public Value) of the BBC 2 Service Licence that BBC 2 is intended to ‘promote education and learning’ and to ‘take a more challenging approach than BBC1’.

## ‘LADDISH’ CONTENT

VLV respondents have commented on the ‘laddish’ nature of some BBC 2 programmes. This is a phenomenon that was noted by media researchers some time ago when Philo and Miller (2000) stated ‘The embracing by the BBC of ‘laddish’ culture is another interesting example of ...the Corporation’s dive down-market for ratings. Thus a programme such as *Top Gear* can become a celebration of the speed and sexual pulling power of cars.’ *Top Gear* continues to feature prominently in the BBC 2 schedules, being broadcast at prime time on Sunday evening with a prime time repeat within a few days. [A third showing on BBC HD is surely overkill.] We feel that the prominence ascribed to *Top Gear* is disproportionate to the programme’s contribution to fulfilling BBC 2’s channel remit as set out in the Service Licence: is this really ‘factual programming that broadens horizons’?

## SCIENCE AND FACTUAL

By contrast, Susan Watts’ contributions to *Newsnight* and programmes in the *Horizon* strand provide quality coverage of science while the continuing repeats of *Planet Earth* and the engaging domestic natural history provided by *Springwatch* and *Autumnwatch* maintain the channel’s high reputation for provision in these areas.

Respondents also welcome a generally solid strand of accessible but informative documentaries.

Although it might be helpful in terms of ratings, the current fashion for celebrity presenters -famously described by John Tusa (in Gibson 2005) as an example of the ‘flight from intelligence’- can be detrimental to the remit of providing programmes of depth and substance. Very often, as in the case of *The Bombing of Coventry*, the established technique of voice-over works beautifully. Similarly, *The Choir*, combining music and the community - was beautifully done and certainly broadened the horizons of those involved. *The Love of Money* series was also excellent; respondents felt that it explained the financial crisis better than anything they had seen or read during the year. As with the Coventry programme it was narrated, and the story was at the centre, not the personality

of the writer/presenter. The combination of well-chosen and edited interviews, film and a first-rate script made it fascinating to watch and learn from.

Respondents have also praised programmes in the *Wonderland* series and the recent *This World* documentary *An Iranian 'Martyr'*.

## NEWS

*Newsnight* provides news analysis and complements BBC 1's late news bulletin. However, there is an increasing tendency for the programme to follow an agenda set by others (often the tabloid press). This is a problem across BBC News – though less so on radio than on television - and it is interesting to note that it has recently been the subject of lengthy discussion on the Radio 4 *Feedback* programme. There are some additional minor irritations with *Newsnight*, notably the growing trend of having the presenter interview a correspondent, and the brief overlap between the start of the programme and the end of the BBC News at Ten/ regional news and weather, which obstructs the seamless switch that many viewers want and expect.

Gimmicks such as the current 'Politics Pen' indicate a move down-market as does the way that news analysis or even straightforward news reporting is apparently being replaced by the less demanding, and less helpful activity of speculation. Sometimes political debate is reduced to sneering and knockabout discussion. However, regular viewers can still find a significant amount of high quality, in-depth reporting. Advanced trails advertising such items would help increase the extent to which licence fee payers are made aware of them.

Respondents praise the informative nature of some editions of *Daily Politics*. They do however want to see and hear more about other European countries and societies, their health, social and educational policies etc.. VLV hears the view that notwithstanding, or precisely because, the European community is a controversial topic, there is little opportunity, even on the BBC, to plug the distance gap and for audiences to learn about the UK's fellow Europeans. Curiously it was the *Europa* programme on the original Gaelic service in Scotland that provided some of the best-quality news of other European countries.

## COMEDY

BBC- 2's Service Licence states that knowledge-building programming should be 'complemented by distinctive comedy, drama and arts programming'. We recognize that comedy is perhaps the area where views are most often coloured by personal taste. Material that appeals to one person may offend someone else. That said it is an area where the 'laddish' quality noted earlier is seen now to play a large part. Programmes that used to demonstrate some degree of wit now seem to rely on personal abuse. In addition some, although not all, of the newer stand -up comics seem so determined to be 'edgy' and 'non PC' that they remind one of the stereotypical comedians of the 1970s and 1980s. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them and Bernard Manning, Chubby Browne and some others who, rightly, were regarded as not meeting the standards required by the BBC.

Our respondents, 'still get some good laughs from *Have I got News for You* and ... the *Thick of It* and acknowledge that some stand-ups are talented and less abusive. Much of the comedy is thought to be well produced and to reflect the cultural diversity in the country. *Outnumbered*, although not on BBC2, has been cited as an example of inoffensive humour and is loved as a sit-com in which people can recognise themselves. In

these uncertain times there is perhaps a need for more comedy and some of it should be just be funny rather than 'edgy'.

## **DRAMA**

In recent times BBC 2 has screened little or no drama with (or without) 'strong authorship and individual voices' In the period under review the BBC 2 schedule contained only one new full length drama - the Churchill bio- picture *Into the Storm*. There was also a Saturday afternoon repeat of Steven Poliakoff's *The Lost Prince*. Welcome though these were, such limited provision does not meet the requirements of the BBC 2 Service Licence. In recent years Britain has produced some of the world's greatest playwrights. However works by writers such as Edward Bond, John Osborne, Dennis Potter, Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker et al are rarely produced for television. They should surely have a natural home on BBC 2, as indeed should the occasional classic drama. Is it too much to expect something by Chekhov, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Shaw or Wilde once every month or so? The *BBC Shakespeare* of yesteryear was admirable. There is no longer a drama strand that produces the excitement of *Play for Today*, *the Wednesday Play* or Alan Bennett's monologues. To some extent this is an area where BBC 4 has replaced BBC 2 but much of BBC 4's own drama, although often of high quality, has been concerned with biography or drama documentary.

## **ARTS**

Despite the Service Licence requirement that 'Arts coverage should be scheduled regularly in peak time' some major programmes tend to be broadcast on the fringe of peak time. *The Culture Show*, which appears to be BBC 2's flagship cultural programme, seems oddly placed at 7pm while the 11. 20 pm repeat may be too late for many. Its content is very varied in both subject and quality; at times it appears to adopt a populist approach, although it does cover some very non-populist subjects and has had some excellent contributions from Andrew Graham-Dixon and Mark Kermode. Despite such admirable items some respondents feel that it suffers in comparison with programmes of the length and calibre of *Arena* and *Monitor*. A major problem is the main presenter, who inspires little confidence as an arts commentator. There is, we feel, a need for more serious arts coverage and greater depth. Melvyn Bragg seems an obvious person for BBC 2 and now that his ITV programme has been axed it is to be hoped that he will be invited to play a role in BBC 2 programming

## **MUSIC**

Popular and folk music genres have been reasonably well catered for during the recent year although some have complained that, to date, BBC 2 has not yet had its usual coverage of the Country Music Awards(CMA). Lovers of classical music and/or opera, on the other hand, are poorly served; there are very few live, or for that matter recorded, transmissions of classical music or opera. Some Promenade concerts are broadcast but this is mainly on BBC 4. We note the plans to screen a feature-film version of Puccini's *La Boheme* (BBC Press Office, 2009). Welcome though this is, it only goes a small part of the way to meet BBC 2's remit 'to bring classical and contemporary works to a broad audience.' Some specialist music genres are ill served and rarely seen, for example, organ music, brass-band and light music.

## **NON-UK PROGRAMMES**

Although the channel, in the words of the Service Licence, 'should nurture UK talent' we feel that BBC 2 should continue to buy and transmit high quality foreign programmes. *The Wire* and *Mad Men*, on BBC 4 but well within the remit of BBC 2, are examples of programmes that are 'original, challenging, innovative and engaging'. We trust there is no truth in the report (*The Times*, 2009) that BBC spending cuts will target the acquisition of

such programmes. We believe that foreign acquisitions should be judged on an individual basis and that quality programmes from foreign sources should be made available free to air, and for the benefit of those who wish to view quality television in an environment free of commercials.

## **SPORT**

Another area of concern is the BBC's reported reluctance to bid for live Test Match coverage, particularly Ashes cricket. In considering the implications of the Davies Review of Listed Events the BBC should take note of the Service Licence requirement to 'offer coverage of the UK's biggest sporting events and those which bring communities of sporting interest together'. We are aware of the financial difficulties but failure to bid for one of 'the UK's biggest sporting events' seems to reflect a poverty of aspiration. Respondents appear reasonably happy with the channel's coverage of other sports. As one put it, 'I think motor cross is well covered and football ... And many are the nights when I find snooker.'

## **TO WHAT EXTENT ARE LICENCE FEE PAYERS AWARE OF AND USING THE SERVICES OF BBC 2 AND ARE SOME DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS BETTER SERVED THAN OTHERS?**

Given that the UK now has more people of pensionable age than children under 16, (Travis, 2008) it is reasonable to ask if there is any substance in the argument that television is sometimes over-concerned with 'Yoof' culture. Do the BBC 2 schedules reflect the intellectual demands of the baby boomers? This is a generation that may require something more stimulating during the day than *Flog It* and *Escape to the Country*. The promised programme, *Muslim Driving School* (BBC Press Office, 2009) about the lives of a diverse group of Muslim women across the north of England appears to be a welcome attempt to provide information about a group that is either under- or misrepresented.

It has been suggested to us that the cross promotion of different programmes on the full range of BBC channels could increase awareness of what BBC 2 has to offer: a good way to introduce viewers to programmes and subjects they have never come across before.

## **ARE THE SERVICES DELIVERING GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY?**

VLV believes that value should not be judged simply in terms of viewing figures. The success or otherwise of BBC 2 should be assessed in terms of the quality of, and need for, the service rather than the size of the audience. We do of course recognize the centrality of the 'dammed if it does and damned if it doesn't' dilemma. The BBC is in a cleft stick. If it disregards ratings, it becomes easier prey to those who argue that the licence fee is unfair and a levy on those who do not use its services. However, it is essential that all relevant stakeholders - licence payers, the BBC Trust and the politicians - recognize the need to rise above the tyranny of numbers and assess the value of the BBC 2 experience to the individual and society at large. We would expect government to support, not penalise this approach. The BBC's services should be evaluated as public goods and as a fundamental right of citizenship, not as commodities subject entirely to the market place.

## CONCLUSION

1. Despite the criticisms outlined above VLV believes that, compared with the alternatives, BBC 2 still provides value for money. Respondents have told us that they consider BBC 2 and BBC 4 “are worth the licence fee alone”.
2. There is little doubt that the service is highly valued by those who want high quality public service broadcasting and the benefits of programmes without commercials.
3. Despite our comments as critical friends we are pleased to acknowledge that BBC 2 still contains cultural & arts-based programmes and programmes for specialist or minority interests that would not find a place on a free-to-air commercial station. The broadcast of the *Teaching Awards* has been cited as an example of exactly what public service broadcasting should provide. It was seen as informative, engaging, and as providing the viewer with the ‘good news’ that does not make it often to the screen or printed page.
4. Although scheduling can sometimes leave one feeling that there is ‘nothing to watch’ on a given evening the overall BBC 2 concept is, in creative content terms astounding, and the channel’s demonstrated production values are very impressive.

# Voice of the Listener & Viewer Response to the BBC Trust Review of BBC 4

*Members of VLV were asked for their views about BBC 4 under six different subject headings: these are their comments*

## **Channel Identity and compatibility with other BBC stations (particularly BBC 2)**

“On the whole BBC 4 does achieve a clear identity, given that it is not a specific niche channel like Sky Arts or the History Channel. It is certainly in the best BBC tradition and has rapidly become a favourite (in our household) among the digital channels.”

“Overall I find BBC 4 my most-watched channel. Whereas previously some of the material would have been on BBC 2, that channel seems to have been relegated to an entertainment channel and my allegiance has switched to BBC 4. However, BBC 4’s determination to run theme evenings can be very irritating – a feast can cause indigestion and at the same time deprive others of variety”

“As BBC 2 gets more ‘popular’, BBC 4 can cater for an audience more like Radio 3’s. Long may that last”.

“Arts coverage between BBC 1, 2 & 4 is inconsistent (the Proms can be found on all three). Sky Arts has a much clearer brief; you know what you’re getting, which is not always so on BBC 4.”

## **Quality and range of content**

“BBC 4 is a distillation of the BBC mission. It can be compared to a vast library which is life-enriching. Some books you never want to read but among the volumes there are life-changing ideas for everyone to discover and enjoy according to their tastes.”

“It is my regular channel. It is as close as any other service to meeting the ideals and values of public service broadcasting”.

“We have found some great things on BBC 4 like the “History of Christianity”, and “Changing the Bard” –lan Hislop’s history of the Poets Laureate.

“BBC 4’s strong point has been its use of archive material – on the whole more creative and imaginative than the way it is used on the History Channel.”

“I think 4 is very good. It gives me a chance to catch up with some excellent earlier series like ‘Talking Landscapes’ and the Kahn films of the 1930’s in colour. It could do more with innovative and classical drama from other than the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I think 4 could do more partnerships with existing arts centres and bodies – something VLV discussed at the arts and broadcasting seminar in 2008. BBC 4 is a good place to pilot new ideas but more foreign cultural material from other PSBs would be welcome.”

“Some of the bio-dramas have been brilliant – in particular those on Hughie Green, Enid Blyton and Margot Fonteyn. This is a rich seam which BBC 4 has done well to mine.”

“The biographical dramas tend to be modestly budgeted in terms of sets and locations but this has on the whole been compensated for by high quality casting and scripts. BBC 4 is now one of my regular channels”.

“BBC 4 largely achieves its objectives but could perhaps strengthen its output in four areas –science, opera, ideas and business. I seldom watch BBC 4 news but when I do I find it superior to both BBC1 and BBC News 24. However, its position head-on with Channel 4 looks a bit like ratings-chasing. Very welcome is the inclusion of the French thriller “Spiral”.

“The recent relay of “Don Carlo” from the Royal Opera House was superbly presented for television. Please divert funds from elsewhere to make this possible on a more regular basis!”

“By not being intellectually ambitious enough, BBC4 is letting Sky get away with its claim of providing the best arts and cultural coverage”.

“Sky Arts 2 has taken hold of regular operatic programming that one would expect to see on BBC 4. It would be good to see BBC 4 establishing a stronger operatic presence now”.

“There can be a tendency to over-use presenters and give them a prominence which intrudes on the content – currently the otherwise excellent “History of Christianity” is disturbed by the constant appearance of the extravagantly swathed Diarmaid MacCulloch. The fact that writer and presenter are the same does not mean their perpetual intrusion gives greater clarity”.

“My only criticism of BBC 4, and it applies to all BBC programmes that include archive material, is the constant indiscriminate cutting off of people’s heads, tops of buildings etc, instead of allowing the archive material to be shown in the original format within the 16 x 9 frame so that it can be properly appreciated. An agreement between the broadcasters, ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, in the USA, already exists to allow this to happen but the BBC seems to be too arrogant to listen and therefore destroys the pleasure of viewing archive material.”

## **Scheduling**

“I think there is a problem with the scheduling of the BBC 4 World News at 7pm as it clashes with the best general news on any channel – Channel 4 News – which also gives better coverage than other BBC bulletins to world news. If a slot could be found for BBC 4 World News at 6.30pm opposite ITV News this would be less of a clash.”

“An earlier start might enable the retired baby boomers and others not at work to have a rather better diet than that currently available on day-time TV.”

“I like themed evenings and I appreciate the two-way relationship with BBC 2”.

“I think the BBC 4 'themed' evenings/weeks, where they 'strip' across a week or fortnight one particular topic, are excellent. One outstanding example was the Mrs Thatcher theme of related programmes.”

“There are some irritations, like the Leeds Piano Competition - six finalists being played out at weekly intervals long after the competition was over, making comparisons between them almost impossible”.

## **Innovation**

“I think it is reasonably innovative. I have enjoyed some of the foreign series like “Wallander”, “Spiral” and, above all, “Mad Men”.”

“Thanks to the fascinating photo and film archive, BBC 4 can show wonderful things like the work of the French photographer Jacques Henri Latiq. Innovative, in that we could never see this before. But I’m not sure whether enough is being done about contemporary visual arts”.

“Innovation for innovation’s sake is not a good idea but the channel has succeeded in pioneering the archive programmes and drama biographies.”

“BBC 4 should be congratulated for its courage in taking risks. But it should also remember that BBC 2 began its life with themed evenings which were quickly abandoned. Younger viewers have no difficulty with hard disc recording and the “pick and choose” approach, whereas many older viewers still expect a channel to offer a varied menu in one evening.”

“The channel should innovate more with some of the great modern dramatists like Edward Bond, John Osborne, Dennis Potter, and Harold Pinter. They are rarely seen on TV. Is it possible to have telecasts of quality drama from the West End and elsewhere at the end of the run? I would also like to see a good book programme”.

## **Repeats**

“Repeats should be spread across the week and not concentrated in one evening as can happen. But cross-repeating policy between BBC 4 and other channels lacks clarity. When is a repeat being used as a promotional tool and when is it for pure merit?”

“I love repeats as I’m always missing things”.

“I am not sure that the relationship with BBC 2 in terms of repeats is very clear and it may detract from the perception of BBC 4 as an entity”.

“I do not have a problem with good quality programmes being repeated”.

## **Promotion of Channel**

“My impression is that BBC 1 and BBC 2 promote BBC 3 more than they do BBC 4. Radio 4 could also do more to draw attention to the channel. There is a case for a 30 minute preview programme of the week’s BBC output on the digital channels – possibly by using the red button”.

“Radio Times should give more space to BBC 4 and there should be more cross-promotion. The channel is held in high regard by those who know about it and who use it. It should receive greater publicity and the BBC should promote the contribution it makes to our collective cultural life. As Lord Reith once said: “Many horses taken to water might actually enjoy the drink.”

“In my opinion BBC 4 must be protected from the vultures and if a channel has to go it should be BBC 3.”

## Conclusion

VLV notes that the BBC Trustees have given BBC 4 a firmly prescriptive brief to provide a mixed genre output for all adults. At the same time the channel is “not expected to develop at the expense of music and arts programmes on BBC 1 and BBC 2 but should complement them by adding greater depth”.

This would seem to put the Controller in a straight jacket. In this survey VLV members have enthused about the quality of many of the arts and music programmes on BBC 4. Indeed, many of us are saying that the channel is rapidly becoming a favourite because it does things previously the preserve of BBC 1 & 2.

Perhaps the BBC Trustees should re-examine their brief in the light of the warm and enthusiastic response to BBC 4. By showing how it can innovate and produce quality programmes it is already developing at the expense of other channels which would do well to emulate their digital companion.

# Voice of the Listener & Viewer Response to the BBC Trust Review of the BBC Red Button Service

## *Executive summary*

In general the members of VLV are satisfied with the BBC Red Button service in so far as it replaces Ceefax, although some users feel it runs rather more slowly than the terrestrial service.

However, VLV members are very concerned about what appears to be a second-class service on Freeview for sporting and entertainment video feeds, as well as loading times for children's games.

## *Detailed VLV responses*

1. In an era when all UK television services will be digital by 2012, but not everyone will have access to broadband or even the internet, the BBC Red Button service has a significant part to play in helping to bridge the digital divide. VLV understands that the digital landscape is changing and that television sets and set top boxes will in the future have broadband access built into them so that viewers and listeners can receive their interactive content from the internet via their television. However, in the short to medium term, millions of licence payers will only have access to interactive content via the BBC Red Button on Freeview. We feel it is vitally important that the BBC does nothing now to impair the Red Button service, and so exacerbate the digital divide.

2. The BBC's annual report on the Red Button service for 2008/9 makes a point of stating that it offers a wide range of sport, from Wimbledon's aggregated service through the perennial favourite of football to minority sports like MotoGP and the Burghley Horse Trials, which are not available elsewhere. However, within months of that report being published, viewers on Freeview – arguably the most digitally disadvantaged – have had a significant part of this service removed to make space for HD.

At present, according to the BBC's annual report, about 25 per cent of digital viewers use the Red Button service, i.e. about 11 million viewers and listeners a week. VLV members are pretty representative of licence payers in that they tend to be relatively light users of the service.

For VLV the next sentence in the annual report is highly significant. "Around one third of users do not access BBC Online, making BBC Red Button an important access point to digital platforms for these viewers". While the BBC Red Button team look to the future of broadband-connected television, existing audiences accessing the Red Button service on Freeview are now at a serious disadvantage in comparison with the other subscription services as regards accessing sporting and entertainment video channels. Viewers using Freeview have financially contributed every bit as much for the rights, through their TV licence, to these events as those who access the programmes via subscription services such as Sky and Virgin. In terms of how conveniently, and what, they can access they are being short-changed.

**The breakdown of our response to individual elements of the BBC Red Button is as follows:**

**(i) News – the latest local, national and international news.**

VLV members who use this service have no significant complaints about the content but some continue to find that it loads far more slowly than the old terrestrial Ceefax.

**(i) (a) News video multi screen.** This service recently disappeared and although it was valued by a number of members, most feel that the BBC rolling news channel and the BBC Red Button text pages give them adequate access to the latest news.

**(ii) Sport – up to the minute sports news and results.**

Again the response to the text service for sport was similar to the response on the general news service. The content was good but the loading time was slower than the original terrestrial experience.

**(ii) (a).** A choice of coverage with extra live matches and alternative commentary. The cancellation of channel 302 on Freeview that was the home to much of this content on that service (to make room for HD) has significantly disadvantaged viewers and listeners who do not pay a subscription for digital TV. Sky and cable viewers are still able to enjoy this content. However, by contrast, VLV members using Freeview are no longer able to view the additional matches or shows that have been paid for by the BBC licence fee. While the loss of the news video channels was not widely mourned, the removal of this content for VLV members on Freeview is considered to be an extremely bad decision, which only serves to widen the digital divide.

**(iii) Information – weather forecasts, travel reports and business news.**

VLV members find this largely satisfactory although some wish the navigation was a little easier.

**(iv) Join in with programmes and have your say.**

This was little used by members.

**(v) CBeebies – games and stories for young children.**

This was little used by members. Again, some felt the games took rather a long time to load.

Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2009