

## THE FUTURE OF PSB UNDER A NEW GOVERNMENT

It's been a remarkably busy period for VLV, considering that government announcements about broadcasting were suspended over the Summer. As we go to press there is great uncertainty about public service broadcasting policy under the new government. We still await the draft Media Bill and the BBC Funding Review. Anticipating what will happen is foolhardy but, as far as VLV can tell, few proposals are either definitely on or off the table.

The new Prime Minister has not ruled out privatisation of Channel 4 but has said she 'prefers to have companies operating in the private sector'. VLV hopes that the concerns of 768 independent producers who oppose privatisation and supported a PACT letter in September will be taken seriously.

On the BBC, the PM has said she will decriminalise non-payment of the TV Licence. On BBC funding the new Secretary of State, Michelle Donelan MP, has said in the past that she considers the TV Licence to be an 'unfair tax' which 'should be scrapped', which doesn't bode well for a universally funded BBC, however in her first media interviews she did say that she will take an evidence based approach.

Over the summer, while Westminster was focused on the Tory leadership campaign, the BBC started implementing its new Digital Strategy. After a low funding settlement the BBC is being forced to cut services and maximise commercial income, while ensuring it maintains reach. The strategy aims to continue to reduce BBC costs while diverting investment into digital. It's hoped this will attract younger audiences and encourage us all to use the iPlayer and BBC Sounds more. BBC Four, CBBC and Radio 4Extra will probably move onto iPlayer/ Sounds in 2025; the BBC will merge BBC News and World News; and local radio content will be reduced when there are fewer listeners. There are worries about the strategy to merge BBC News and World News and VLV is also concerned that those without internet access may be disadvantaged by the Digital Strategy.

During this period of change, paradoxically, Ofcom is planning to 'step back' from detailed BBC regulation by removing most quotas for BBC factual and children's content which VLV is opposing (see article page 4).

It feels as though we have been waiting for reform of the PSB system for a long time now. Hopefully the landscape will become clearer in the coming months because uncertainty is detrimental for the broadcasting industry and inevitably, therefore, detrimental for audiences.

# VLV AUTUMN CONFERENCE

Tuesday, 22nd November 2022

VLV's annual Autumn Conference will be held at The Geological Society, Piccadilly, London, from 10.30am—4pm, on Tuesday 22nd November.

The Conference takes place at a time of huge uncertainty for the broadcasters. A decision on the future of Channel 4, a new Media Bill and a review of the future funding of the BBC are all live issues.



The public service broadcasters are facing huge challenges. Funding difficulties, particularly for the BBC, raise the prospect of greater commercialisation of content. We will be discussing what all this means for listeners and viewers, and UK civil society, with a range of industry leaders and commentators. Speakers will be announced shortly.

To find out more and **book for the event, please go to <https://www.vlv.org.uk/upcoming-events/>**, complete the enclosed booking form, or contact us.

## NOMINATIONS FOR THE VLV AWARDS 2022

Nomination forms for the VLV awards, covering programmes across the whole of 2022, are included with this Bulletin. The awards celebrate the contribution made by high-quality public service programmes and presenters. As always, there is a wide range of programming to choose from across the broadcasting spectrum. Please do take the time to nominate your favourite programmes to help VLV celebrate the achievement of those who did such a good job informing, educating and entertaining us during 2022. Winners particularly value these awards because they are chosen by the people who really matter: their listeners and viewers. We are keen to include a wide range of broadcasters and we encourage members to nominate programmes from several broadcasters where possible.

**Nominations should be returned to the VLV office by post or email to [awards@vlv.org.uk](mailto:awards@vlv.org.uk) by Monday 10 January 2023**



**Voice of the Listener & Viewer**  
Championing Excellence and Diversity in Broadcasting

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VLV represents citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and champions excellence and diversity. VLV is free from political, sectarian and commercial affiliations. VLV is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulation that underpin the British broadcasting system and in particular to maintain the principles of public service broadcasting.

Views expressed in the bulletin are those of contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the VLV.

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## FROM THE CHAIRMAN, COLIN BROWNE



Welcome to our Autumn Bulletin.

It is really disappointing to have to write – as I have done in the last two bulletins - that many of the challenges and uncertainties facing our broadcasters remain as unresolved as ever.

As we know, the broadcasters face a wide range of challenges – financial, technological, the changing marketplace, the new ways in which viewers and listeners wish to access services - and political. It is this last dimension that has been dominant over the last few months. The political turmoil and changes in government mean that, at the time of writing, key decisions affecting the future of broadcasting, and particularly public service broadcasting, have still not been made. In all these issues, the VLV focuses on what we consider to be the best outcome for listeners and viewers, and civil society more generally in the UK.

While we sympathise with the PSBs' predicament, including the funding challenges facing the BBC, we are also worried by aspects of Ofcom's proposals to reduce regulation of PSB. We believe that existing regulation should be maintained to ensure that citizens in the UK continue to have access to a range of high quality, UK PSB content. In recent statements, Ofcom has said it proposes to take what it calls a 'step back' from detailed regulation of the public service broadcasters, including the BBC, allowing them to set their own targets and report back on their delivery, rather than being constrained by quotas.

VLV disagrees with this approach. While we acknowledge that quotas can be a box-ticking exercise, it is clear that, without them, at-risk content declines further – for example children's content on the commercial channels. We are concerned that Ofcom's proposals might lead to less independent, robust regulation of the BBC, at a time when it is under significant financial and market pressure.

The BBC appears to have reached the end of the road as far as achieving major efficiency savings is concerned. Given the inadequate funding settlement imposed by the government, it is likely the BBC will have to reduce or completely remove services during this half of the Charter, if it is to fill the hole in its finances. Under present regulation, it will be allowed to do so without any public consultation.

This applies to the proposed mergers of BBC News and BBC World News, about which a number of members have expressed serious concerns. Ofcom plans to drop the only condition for BBC News in the new version of its Operating Licence, which will mean the merger can go ahead without debate. It is entirely wrong that this major change in one of the BBC's core activities can be made without consultation or regulatory scrutiny of any kind.

We await government's announcement of the Terms of Reference for the BBC Funding Review. Under current arrangements, the government is able to change the funding model without any public or Parliamentary consultation. Once again, we consider this to be simply wrong. We strongly believe that BBC services should continue to be universally available to all citizens of the UK and that its funding model should ensure this. Once again, to make such a fundamental change, without any form of public or parliamentary scrutiny, would be completely unacceptable. We will be discussing all these issues at our Autumn Conference on 22nd November, and I look forward to seeing many of you there.

The VLV is hugely dependent on the many individuals who contribute their time, knowledge, and expertise to inform and support what we do. No one has contributed more, over many years, than Vincent Porter, who sadly died in August. Andrew Taussig's obituary of him is on page 3; a former Trustee, his involvement dates back to the very early days of Jocelyn Hay. He was a source of wise advice and counsel to me until the end. I will miss him greatly.

Colin Browne  
Chairman, VLV

## BBC NEWS MERGER CAUSES CONCERN

The BBC is facing opposition to its cost-cutting proposal to merge the BBC News Channel and BBC World News. The proposal is to have one TV news channel to serve both the UK and global audiences with opt-outs for the domestic service if there is breaking news. The merger will involve the loss of 70 jobs and BBC union members have voted in favour of industrial action in a consultative ballot. While reducing duplication of resources is a sensible approach to reducing costs, it is being questioned whether the new channel will provide adequate domestic news. One of the current proposals, for example, is to livestream video of Nicky Campbell's Radio 5 Live morning show in place of traditional bulletins or other programming. In advance of the change Ofcom is proposing to remove conditions for the News Channel in the new BBC Operating Licence.

## DCMS APPOINTMENTS

Michelle Donelan, MP for Chippenham, was announced as the new Secretary of State for DCMS on September 6th. Ms Donelan was Secretary of State for Education for 2 days in July 2022 and prior to that an Education Minister for 18 months. Before becoming an MP in 2015, Ms Donelan worked for The History Channel and WWE in marketing and communications. Damian Collins MP continues as a Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and Julia Lopez MP returns as a DCMS Minister after resigning in July.



## ONLINE SAFETY BILL DELAY

The progress of the Online Safety Bill has been halted because the Government has concerns about it limiting 'legal but harmful speech'. There is a useful background piece in the most recent [edition of the British Journalism Review by Professor Steven Barnett](#) which sets out the challenge involved in reconciling the need to protect free speech with the imperative to protect citizens.

## NEW OFCOM BOARD MEMBER

Will Harding, former Chief Strategy Officer for Global, has joined the Ofcom Board as a Non-Executive Director. Will has almost 30 years' experience in the media industry. Prior to working at GCap Media/Global, Will worked at Sky as Commercial and Operations Director of its new media business and before that he worked for BBC Worldwide.



## OBITUARY: VINCENT PORTER



Vincent was, for more than a quarter of a century, a prominent member of the Voice of the Listener & Viewer; for most of that time as a Board member or Trustee.

To the issues around broadcasting, especially public service broadcasting and journalism, he brought the additional perspectives derived from the world of

cinema and film studies, a field which, in UK terms, he had played a distinguished seminal role in creating, and which had taken him to a Professorship at the University of Westminster. He was an intellectual heavyweight, enriching the Board with both a breadth of view and a thorough, well researched concern for detail.

Beyond his time on the VLV Board, however – right into his very last days – informally, but with no less fervour or commitment, he was offering ideas, advice and expertise: "Has VLV a position on x?", "What is VLV going to do about y?", he would insistently ask – a stickler, because he cared.

At VLV Conferences or events, regular participants over the years came to expect a 'Vincent moment', when he rose to ask a question – words delivered at a statesmanlike pace, the topic anything from a carefully crafted suggestion around the licence fee to mischievously pointing up an insidious example of product placement. Whatever the issues at stake, Vincent was assiduous and thorough in teasing out the source behind the statements, and the facts behind the rhetoric.

For Vincent, the European dimension of PSB was always important. He was a keen champion and, for several years, President of EURALVA (the European Alliance of Listener and Viewer Associations). He was particularly interested in copyright issues, having authored a pamphlet entitled "Beyond the Berne Convention: copyright broadcasting and the single European Market". He deeply regretted the UK's departure from the European Union, and late in life joined the European Movement.

An invitation from Vincent to a sandwich and a drink at the Savage Club – that iconic meeting place for many from the world of the arts – is something we will much miss; still more, we will miss the company of Vincent himself. Dear Vincent, rest in peace.

## COMMERCIAL RADIO LISTENING OVERTAKES THE BBC

Rajar figures for Quarter 2 show that for the first time since 1999 audiences spent more time listening to commercial radio stations in the UK than to the BBC.

Continued BBC budget cuts and losing talent, such as Jon Sopel and Emily Maitlis, to commercial rivals may partly explain the decline. The commercial radio sector is reported to be investing heavily and is dominated by super media groups—Global, Bauer and News UK—which are not hampered by having PSB obligations.



# REFLECTIONS ON THE MAITLIS McTAGGART LECTURE

By Bob Usherwood

“What do we do when a known liar becomes our Prime Minister?” That was the question asked by Dorothy Byrne, then Head of Channel 4 News, the last time I reviewed a McTaggart Lecture for this Bulletin.

This year, Emily Maitlis, in her address, gave an answer that should concern us all. We are, she said, “Seeing politicians move in directions that are deeply and clearly deleterious to basic democratic governance”. Her concern is populism and the way it affects how journalists work, and then turns into “a sophisticated form of self censorship”.

Although it was the identification of Sir Robbie Gibb, as an agent on the BBC Board, that made all the headlines, it would be wrong to see her speech as simply a criticism of the recent prime minister, or the Conservative Party. She illustrated her argument by recalling events involving politicians, ranging from Jeremy Corbyn to Liz Truss, and many others. These established that, when journalists and broadcasters “are primed to back down, even apologise to prove [they are] journalistically fair. That can be exploited by those crying ‘bias’. If it suits those in power to shut [them] up – or down – they can”.

A key populist claim is “that the mainstream media could be dismissed as ‘fake’”. Maitlis traced this back to the Brexit and Trump days when journalists adopted a “myopic style of journalism”, identified as “both sideism”. Then at the BBC, she observed “it might take ... producers five minutes to find 60 economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole voice who espoused it. But by the time we went on air we simply had one of each. We presented this unequal effort to our audience as balance. It wasn’t.”

It is interesting to compare this to the Brexit coverage by ITN, which many people thought was better than that on the BBC. ITV’s political editor, Robert Peston, thinks the BBC was confused about impartiality and used his expertise to inform audiences that Britain would be worse off under Brexit. This reflects his thinking on impartial reporting as stated in his 2020 Hugh Cudlipp Lecture, in which he maintained: “It is journalism that expresses a view – that this or that is likely to happen, that this or that politician is more likely to be right about a certain important issue – based on evidence, but never on political affiliation, or religious leanings, or commercial interests or prejudice.” (<https://londonpressclub.co.uk/?p=403>).

In addition to “both sideism”, Maitlis, courtesy of the Cambridge academic Ayala Panievsky, introduced another “way populist rhetoric has been used to discredit and disempower journalists.” Identified as ‘strategic bias’ it occurs because “broadcasters’ desire to be seen as neutral agents paradoxically enables populists to further spread the claim that [they] are not.” To illustrate this, she used a comment by Donald Trump, given to a CBS correspondent. In this he revealed the reason for bashing the press. He admitted, “You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you.”

When the BBC bosses reprimanded Emily Maitlis for her introduction to the edition of *Newsnight*, dealing with Dominic Cummings’ trip to Barnard Castle, I was probably in the minority of my VLV colleagues in thinking she had done nothing wrong. Then, I am not a BBC insider. However, I am a member of CILIP, a professional body that cares about accurate information

and impartiality. It has a set of ethical principles including one that could, perhaps should, be applied to the BBC. This commits members to uphold, promote and defend: ‘Impartiality, and avoidance of inappropriate bias, in acquiring and evaluating information and in mediating it to other information-users’. Interestingly, this echoes a suggestion in the Liberal Democrats’ 2019 manifesto that the BBC should “take a leading role in increasing media literacy and educating all generations in tackling the impact of fake news.”

Public service broadcasters should now consider it a professional duty to identify inaccuracies in any information they share and work to facilitate a more critical and discriminating audience. This would prevent what John Birt once identified as “the bias in television journalism.” That is “a bias against understanding.”

It is worth remembering that when John Reith started the BBC, his three founding principles were to inform, **educate** and entertain. The second of these is even more important in a media world that often seeks sensationalism and in which numerous newspapers and, sadly now in the UK, some television stations, present their news from an extreme political position. Education is necessary when so many people’s critical judgement has been decayed by social media and amplified, as Maitlis’ magnificent McTaggart Lecture so clearly demonstrates, by the rise of populism and populist politicians.

*Bob Usherwood is a VLV Trustee and Emeritus Professor at the University of Sheffield*

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## JRCT UPDATE & #SOB CAMPAIGN

Early 2022 saw good progress with the Steering Group partners of the Citizens’ Forum (CF); however, engaging more member partners proved challenging, due to post-pandemic civil society reduced resources, political uncertainty, and the war in Ukraine.

Our funders, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT), agreed a change of project scope; we would reorientate the CF project to develop a broader public information campaign, amplified by our Steering Group partners.

Continuing close work with existing CF members on policy consultations, emphasis shifted to communications instead of project management. The JRCT grant enabled a review of VLV’s external communications activity, allowing stronger focus on social media — since March, VLV has increased its Twitter engagement by 1407%.

The new campaign’s aim is to work with our partners, harnessing the power of social media, to promote a set of agreed PSB principles that benefit citizens. The intention is to communicate with the general public, most of whom will have no prior knowledge of the broadcasting ecology, to inform them about PSB: what it is, why is it important to society, what are the threats to it, what can we all do to protect it and to safeguard citizen interests? This will be important during the Media Bill process through Parliament, and the BBC Charter Renewal.

The campaign will launch in the coming months, under the campaign tags **#SaveOurBroadcasting**, or **#SOB**. These ‘tags’ will be used to collectively communicate a series of calls-to-action, sharing messages and posts with likeminded broadcasters, media and journalists, to engage directly with the public, to inform, influence, and motivate them to care about protecting PSB, to engage with their MPs and policy makers, and to become VLV members. See [www.twitter.com/vlvuk](https://www.twitter.com/vlvuk)



The Broadcast 2040+ campaign was launched by Arqiva, a TV/radio infrastructure provider, at VLV's Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting.

Asking government for certainty and a commitment to preserve Freeview broadcasting until 2040 and beyond, the campaign is backed by a coalition, including VLV, Age UK, Silver Voices, the Children's Media Foundation, the Rural Services Network, and the British Broadcasting Challenge.

Freeview TV and radio, delivered for free, through an aerial, into homes, cars and workplaces, is a valued part of the fabric of life, binding us as families, communities and as a nation. Despite alternatives, such as streaming, broadcast Freeview remains the backbone for many. An Ipsos report, by Arqiva, found that over half of adults in Great Britain (56%) have watched Freeview, via an aerial, in the past year, with 43% watching it every week.

People who value Freeview services the most are often those who have the least - older people, the lonely/disconnected, those in low-income households or in hard-to-reach rural areas. These groups are the least likely to have superfast broadband connection, the digital skills, the confidence to use streaming apps, or the budget to afford subscription costs. During the cost-of-living crisis, we know that Freeview is more important than ever; a Kantar survey found that households are cutting back on streaming services, with 500,000+ subscription cancellations attributed to a need to save money.

Affordability is a key barrier to alternatives to Freeview, but a skills gap also prevents many using online services, being higher among the over 55s. Even in today's digital world, many in society are primarily offline - we must continue to support them, or risk digital exclusion and deepening inequalities across the UK.

The future of broadcast will be decided in the coming years. Currently, certainty for the provision of Freeview TV and radio, received through an aerial, runs until the early 2030s. That may seem like a long way away, but on a topic like this, it is closer than you might think.

There are major upcoming policy decisions the UK must take if it wants to commit to broadcast services for the long term. The first of these decisions will be at the World Radiocommunication Conference 2023 (WRC-23). At this conference, countries will decide how spectrum (radio frequencies used for broadcasting) should be allocated to TV, and to other technologies, like mobile phone services.

Other decisions could impact ongoing provision of Freeview, including those around funding models for the BBC, the next BBC Charter Period, and the future of PSB. 85% of adults in Great Britain believe government or their local MPs should actively support the continued provision of broadcast TV and radio.

By speaking up now in support of these critical services for viewers and listeners, together it's hoped they can be preserved for years to come.

To join the campaign, please contact [fmarking@strandpartners.com](mailto:fmarking@strandpartners.com)



Despite Parliament being in recess, the summer has been busy for VLV. We have made a number of policy submissions to represent the interests of citizens.

**Media Bill:** In coming months VLV will be focused on the Media Bill which was due to be published before recess. As we go to press there is no information as to when the Bill might be published. It is urgently required because existing legislation, the 2003 Communications Act, was introduced during the infancy of the internet and is now out of date. One priority is that societally valuable content should be promoted wherever you watch it – on demand, on an app or on a smart TV – to replicate the existing linear broadcasting system where public service content is prominent. Public service audio similarly needs to be promoted and where prominence is paid for, that should be transparent. The Bill is also due to include a new definition for the PSB remit to allow broadcasters greater flexibility; VLV is concerned that the PSB remit should not be diluted. We will be keeping a close eye on the Bill's progress.

**BBC Regulation:** Separately VLV is worried about Ofcom proposals to 'step back' from detailed regulation of the BBC. Ofcom has proposed that quotas should be removed for many genres. It will mean there will no longer be externally set quotas for arts and religious content or comedy, for example. The quotas for factual and drama content for CBBC are also being removed. Ofcom will allow the BBC to set its own targets on an annual basis. The BBC will then report back on its performance in its Annual Report the following year. VLV is opposing many of these changes because it reduces the independence of the regulation of the BBC. This could undermine the integrity of the process and trust in the system. It could also lead to a further erosion of genres which are already in market failure. There is incontrovertible evidence that when quotas are removed for 'at risk' genres, the volume of such content declines, as has happened with UK children's content.

**BBC Mid-Term Review:** VLV sent comments to the DCMS in response to the government's mid-term Review of the BBC. The DCMS conducted limited stakeholder engagement for this Review, focusing on specific themes – editorial standards and impartiality, complaints, commercial governance and regulation, competition, diversity and transparency. VLV highlighted that there is now virtually no BBC consultation with the public which means the BBC is less accountable today than it was under the BBC Trust.

VLV submissions can be found at [www.vlv.org.uk/issues-policies/](http://www.vlv.org.uk/issues-policies/)

# 100 NOT OUT

A personal view, by Robert Beveridge



The BBC is celebrating one hundred years of existence. When we contemplate the many and varied crises which have engulfed the BBC throughout the past century, it is tempting to be complacent and to dismiss current threats as not being existential, but that would be a mistake. 'One hundred, not out' does not mean that the innings will continue.

At the *Edinburgh Book Festival*, Professor David Hendy said that much depended on the result of the next general election. The BBC might end up like PBS in the United States. In this sense, he is correct. Nadine Dorries may no longer be DCMS secretary, but the ambitions she had to privatise Channel 4 and to destroy the BBC's funding model may live on, despite widespread opposition to both policies. It cannot be said too often that we would miss the BBC, if it changed out of all recognition. **We would never get it back. Yet the BBC, and its funding model, are a great success story.**

Consider the social, economic, cultural, and technological changes since 1922. Then wonder at the ways in which the BBC has responded to these changes and continued to make and broadcast content which, overall, provides a quality of information, education and entertainment for all the country and is great value for money.

The licence fee has been the vital underpinning of this and has always come out as the best, or the least-worst, when compared with alternatives. Why change when it has been a success over so many decades?

The BBC is a cultural health service which has been trusted. But that trust has been declining, just as Britain is. Britain itself is in danger of disappearing. It is, now, the Disunited Kingdom and the debates about the BBC symbolise and reflect this state of affairs. The country is split over Brexit, but the BBC is **neither** the Brexit **nor** the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation, although both sides argue that it has given too much airtime to the other.

Similarly, the coverage of the 2014 referendum on independence for Scotland gave many examples of news reporting which struggled, to say the least, to be balanced and impartial and audience support for and trust in the BBC, north of the border, has continued to decline.

The BBC's international reputation is founded on its ability and track record in providing accurate reporting, even when the UK and other governments were opposed to this. Yet, so many informed voices, Maitlis et al, now assert that the BBC and its journalism needs to recover its confidence and its independence.

In relation to the latter, former DCMS Secretary Dorries recently issued legal directions to the BBC. This is exceptionally unusual, and is, or should be, reserved for times of war, etc. But, no: she instructed the BBC to have a target of 25 per cent of staff to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and to ensure that 60 per cent of radio and 50 per cent of tv programme production spend is outside London by the end of 2027. One might well agree with these goals. That is not the point. It is the way in which she instructs the BBC which is problematic. This compromises the independence of the BBC.

The BBC is part of the unwritten constitution of the UK. But, as we know from the behaviour of the Johnson government, the Lord Hennessy 'good chaps' theory of government, i.e. that there are modes of behaviour and boundaries which are not transgressed, no longer holds.

Governments of whatever party cannot be trusted with the BBC. So, we now need codified rules/laws to protect the BBC, and this should form part of the debate up to the next charter.

VLV members are invited to write in with their ideas, but, for now, we could perhaps ensure that:

1. The Board of the BBC be appointed like judges, perhaps by a parliamentary commission, with representation from the four nations. Indeed, the BBC could, and perhaps should, become federal in culture and structure.

2. Funding for the BBC should be set by a body independent of governments. Perhaps the Audit Commission, with licence fee payer representation securing the citizen, as well as the consumer interest.

3. If the UK government wishes to benefit from the soft power of the BBC, i.e. the World Service, and also intelligence-gathering from BBC monitoring services, then it should pay for this, and at a market rate. The licence fee can pay for *Spooks*, the programme, but not for spooks and spies.

4. BBC Alba and S4C should receive equal funding, but from a variety of sources, with a financial floor established to support their success in economic as well as cultural terms. A good number of their programmes should be shown on the UK network. BBC Alba is already a great success and viewers across the UK should be able to enjoy their programmes. Subtitles are not a barrier, as Scandi noir has shown.

5. The BBC might do well to do smaller, as well as better, but it does need to stay in the business of making and broadcasting something for everyone; of making the good popular, and the popular good; and providing a public space without paywalls. That is the lesson from the past for the future

*Robert Beveridge is a VLV Trustee and Professor at the University of Sassari in Sardinia.*

## VLV AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN BROADCASTING 2021



After a two-year gap, caused by the pandemic, we were delighted to be able to present the 2021 Awards, in person, at a ceremony supported by Arqiva, on 23 June 2022.

We were particularly pleased to welcome as the presenter the brilliant Steve Punt, who had originally agreed to present the awards in 2020.

As always, the awards featured an array of excellent contributors and high-quality programming voted for by VLV members, including Chris Mason, the BBC's political editor, and Clive Myrie, voted best individual contributors to audio and television; *It's a Sin* and *A Charles Paris Mystery: A Deadly Habit* for television and audio drama; and *Mark Steel's in Town* for audio comedy. The Naomi Sargent award went to Jackie Edwards for her inspiring work as head of the Young Audiences Content Fund. The BBC's Natural History Unit received the Arqiva-supported Award for Innovation and presented a fascinating pre-awards talk about the NHU's work.

A full list of the winners can be found on the VLV website or on request from the VLV office.



## LOCAL RADIO

By Dr Rob Watson

A new Broadcasting Bill is presently being negotiated and written by the Department for Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS), which seems certain to push through substantial deregulation of the UK radio industry.

The proposed legislation that goes before parliament will allow national and international commercial radio operators to compete, without any of the current checks made by Ofcom, the national regulator for communications and broadcasting. The question many are concerned about, as a result, is, will this deregulation work in the interest of both the citizens and consumers?

What will deregulation of radio in the UK mean in practice? The commercial radio networks want to free themselves of their analogue licence obligations, and while shifting their services to DAB, they want to be able to compete directly with one another across the whole of the country, regardless of the similarity their services might have already provided locally. Competition will be based on packaged formats and branding, and purely the market mechanism, and will no longer take account of local needs.

One problem with our broadcasting regulation model, which may only get worse, if deregulation on this scale is allowed, is the number of broadcast services that are passing themselves off as 'local', when in fact they are part of a national network. An increasing number of commercial radio services are no longer produced in our towns and communities, because Ofcom and DCMS tend to see local as anything that isn't national. So, it is assumed that these top-down stations are meeting local needs.

Without regulation of what 'local' actually means in practice, however, we will inevitably see less content and services that are produced in the places where we live. Content production will become concentrated in regional centres, and automated across these networks. With fewer producers and programme makers on the ground and living in our neighbourhoods and communities. A batch of jingles telling you that this is a radio service for your town does not make them genuinely local.

Similarly, the BBC is struggling to maintain the viability of its local radio services, and over the last decade has been centralising and networking production and programming. The BBC is barely providing genuinely local services that are meeting local needs. BBC local radio increasingly uses networked content across each region, with a few local opt-out variants that fit with national 'action-day' content.

There is also a suggestion that community radio should be deregulated, which we think means removing income caps on on-air commercial activity that are placed on stations that have a primary social gain purpose. Community radio stations are protected from having to 'monetise' their content in the commercial market, so that they can develop accessible services which anyone can take part in, discuss topics of local concern, and put in place training so that people can learn to become community broadcasters.

The income cap placed on community radio signals that these stations have a primary social function that would not survive in the market.

It shows that community radio has a social-gain purpose, and looks to support local community life, civic discussion, learning, community cohesion and intercultural understanding.

If community radio stations end up being treated like commercial stations, then it won't be long before access and training are seen as a hindrance and will get dropped. Commercial funding changes the nature of the service, reducing the accessibility of people to take part and learn how to make their own media. This includes access to studios, which are expensive to maintain; training, which is expensive to deliver; self-governance, giving local people a direct say in what is provided; self-defined content, which is an expression of local concern and interest, identity and place.

Social gain radio ensures democratic practice and participation in the mechanisms of production of content. So, if the principles on which community radio is based are watered down now, then it won't be long before the people, who are not otherwise represented in the big media corporations, will lose their access to these community media platforms.

The white paper, for some reason, doesn't connect the needs of local communities, as outlined in the Levelling Up legislation. Local democracy, economic regeneration and self-determination must surely be dependent on everyone having access to local media services that they can take part in?

At a time when the affordability of all our commercial and public services is at the forefront of our minds, it seems crazy that the government is pushing forward with only licencing Small-Scale DAB platforms and not allowing anyone, commercial or community, to apply for an analogue licence. A digital switchover at a time of financial crisis would involve forcing people to change multiple analogue radio receivers and replace them with expensive DAB sets. AM & FM services are cheap to operate and receive and remain in high use. So why force people to shift?

A useful compromise might be a digital move-over, with the big stations moving over to DAB, and the AM & FM frequencies remaining open to genuinely local services. As more frequencies become available it will be easier for local radio providers to enter the broadcasting field, either as commercial or community providers. We will need to tighten-up on what is meant by 'local' so we do not get people passing-off ghost stations as genuinely local, and since we can do this with food (Melton Mowbray Pork Pies/Cornish Pasties for example), surely we can protect our local media.

Community media needs effective, transparent and smart regulation, and, while competition in the market is good, we are learning from the water and energy markets that, left unfettered, companies will inevitably act in their own interest and not in the interests of the wider public. We need media that is regulated on the basis of social investment, which sees civic and cultural participation as a benefit.

*Dr Rob Watson is an independent consultant for community media. He discusses media comms practices, focused on social-gain, personal development and community enhancement on his podcast at <https://decentered.co.uk/>*

## TRUSTEES

**Professor Jeanette Steemers and Professor Bob Usherwood, who have completed two three-year stints as trustees, are obliged to stand down for a year before they can be re-elected.**

We would like to thank both of them for all the work, support and time they have devoted to the VLV.

All our trustees are volunteers and without them the VLV would not be able to carry out its important work. **If you are interested in working with the VLV as a volunteer or becoming a VLV trustee, please get in touch with VLV's Chairman, Colin Browne.**

## VLV AGM 2022

**The 20th Annual General Meeting of Voice of the Listener and Viewer Ltd will be held on Tuesday, 22 November 2022 at 4pm, at The Geological Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG.**

Nominations and resolutions should be sent, not less than 3 days and not more than 21 days before the AGM, to: **The Chairman, VLV, The Old Rectory Business Centre, Springhead Road, Northfleet, Kent, DA11 8HN.**

Papers for the AGM will be emailed in advance and copies by post will be available on request, by contacting Lucy Regan at the VLV office.

## THE JOCELYN HAY LECTURE 2022

By the time you receive the Bulletin, the Jocelyn Hay Lecture will be about to happen, or have just taken place. We are delighted that the Lecture will be delivered by **Sir Peter Bazalgette**, one of the most influential and experienced people in British TV, and chaired by **Professor Jane Martinson**. Sir Peter's appearance, at **6pm, Tuesday 11th October** will come days after he steps down from his role as **Chairman of ITV**, and following a distinguished career as one of the UK's most successful independent TV producers. After his address, he will be **in conversation with Professor Martinson**, with opportunity for the audience to submit their questions to him, online. Hopefully, you have received email notifications of this online event and are attending—if not, **please go to the 'Upcoming events' section of the website to book.**

## Diary Dates

**The Jocelyn Hay Lecture**  
**Tuesday 11 October 2022**  
**6pm - 7pm**  
Online

**VLV Autumn Conference**  
**Tuesday 22 November 2022**  
**10.30am - 4pm**  
The Geological Society,  
Piccadilly, London

**VLV AGM**  
**Tuesday 22 November 2022**  
**4pm - 5pm**  
The Geological Society,  
Piccadilly, London

**VLV will announce other events over the coming months. Please check email alerts, and the website for details.**

## Please send us your email address

VLV sends out regular updates by email.

If you haven't registered your email address with us, or your email address has changed, please let Lucy Regan know at [info@vlv.org.uk](mailto:info@vlv.org.uk)



## NEW SUBSCRIPTION / DONATION / CHANGE OF ADDRESS\* (delete as appropriate)

**VLV Subscription** - Individual £30 Joint (two at same address) £45 Student e-membership £10

Please make cheques payable to VLV and send to The Old Rectory Business Centre, Springhead Road, Northfleet, Kent DA11 8HN or pay online at [www.vlv.org.uk](http://www.vlv.org.uk)

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