



Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Championing Excellence and Diversity in Broadcasting

Spring 2020

Bulletin 127

BBC SEARCHES FOR NEW DG AS VLV ANALYSIS SHOWS 30% BUDGET CUT SINCE 2010

The BBC is looking for a new director-general to replace Tony Hall amid mounting political pressure from the government over the licence fee. The BBC is also bracing itself for negative publicity as it gears up to restrict the number of over 75 households that can receive free TV licences.

The unprecedented strain on the corporation is laid bare in an analysis by the VLV that shows the BBC's budget for UK services has been slashed by 30% in real terms over the past decade.

VLV believes that the gathering threats to the BBC could lead to its demise in its current form because they point to a full review of whether the BBC should remain a universal service. What happens will depend on the government, despite there having been no commitment to review the BBC's funding model in the 2019 Conservative manifesto.

This crisis has hit the BBC when it is already having to make major savings, such as the 450 job cuts recently announced at the news division, and it finds itself on the back foot on a number of issues from free licences for the over 75s to equal pay claims. Lord Hall's decision to step down in the summer means the BBC is hunting for a new leader at a time of existential peril.

The main focus of the political debate is the TV licence fee. Since 2010 the cost of the TV licence has risen from £145.50 to £154.50 in 2019 (and to £157.50 in April) but a six-year freeze, combined with government raids, have meant 30% less public funding available for UK services. See page 6 for more detail.

Until now the BBC has successfully maintained the quality of its output, but in the context of constantly increasing competition from video on demand and online services, it is unclear how it will be able maintain its current reach. BBC chairman Sir David Clementi made it clear in February that if further cuts are made, crucial public services will have to be scrapped.

Since the election, it has become clear that reviewing the size, scope and remit of the BBC is on the government's agenda. The government would like the BBC to fund free TV licences for all households containing someone over 75 (a benefit that cost £655m in 2019); it is consulting on whether to decriminalise non-payment of the TV licence fee; and recent briefings from government sources have suggested that the licence fee should be replaced by a subscription system.

See also Chairman's letter, page 2

VLV's 37th ANNUAL SPRING CONFERENCE Thursday 30 April 2020



Patrick Barwise and Peter York, the authors of a forthcoming book about the BBC, are to speak at the VLV Spring Conference on 30 April. They will be addressing the multiple threats facing the BBC, a theme likely to dominate the conference. Their book, *The War Against the BBC*, will be published in the summer. The conference will include the VLV Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting 2019 – for more details about the awards, see page 8.

CHANGE AT THE TOP FOR DCMS, OFCOM AND SELECT COMMITTEE

Oliver Dowden was appointed as culture secretary in the February cabinet reshuffle. His elevation came the day after Ofcom appointed a new chief executive and said its chairman would be leaving early. In another change to the key personnel influencing the future of British broadcasting, Julian Knight has been elected to chair the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee.

Dowden becomes the ninth culture secretary since the Conservatives came to power in 2010. One of his predecessors, John Whittingdale, has returned to the DCMS as a minister of state for media and data.

Ofcom's new chief executive is the senior civil servant Dame Melanie Dawes. The government has said it plans to give Ofcom new powers under her leadership to regulate 'online harms'. In light of this, Lord Burns has agreed to step down as Ofcom's chairman later in the year. Although his term was to have run until the end of 2021, the government wanted a new chair in place to oversee the expansion of the regulator's role.

Knight, a former BBC journalist, secured the chairmanship of the DCMS committee by defeating the incumbent, fellow Tory MP Damian Collins, by 283 votes to 274 in a secret ballot of MPs.

*Championing Excellence and Diversity
in Broadcasting*

VLV Patrons

Ms Helen Boaden
Rt Revd Lord Eames OM
Ms Claire Enders
Sir Francis Graham-Smith FRS
Lord Inglewood DL
Lord Phillips of Sudbury OBE
Lord Puttnam CBE
Lady Solti
Ms Sarah Thane CBE JP
Sir John Tusa
Mr Will Wyatt CBE

VLV Trustees

Mr Alan Barlow
Professor Robert Beveridge
Mr Colin Browne (Chairman)
Ms Sophie Chalk
Ms Mary Dixon (Secretary)
Mr Peter Gordon (Treasurer)
Professor Sarita Malik
Dr Maria Michalis
Professor Jeanette Steemers
Professor Bob Usherwood
Mr Anthony Wills

VLV Office

The Old Rectory Business Centre
Springhead Road
Northfleet
Kent DA11 8HN

Tel: 01474 338716
e-mail: info@vlv.org.uk

Sarah Stapylton-Smith
Website

Administrator
www.vlv.org.uk

@vlvuk



VLV represents citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and champions excellence and diversity in broadcasting. 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.

Registered Address: The Old Rectory
Business Centre, Springhead Road, Northfleet,
Kent DA11 8HN.

The Bulletin is edited by Chris Tryhorn and published by the Voice of the Listener & Viewer Ltd, a charitable company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales No 4407712. Charity No: 1152136

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

ISSN 1475-2948

FROM THE CHAIRMAN, COLIN BROWNE



Any illusions that the BBC might have faced a period of relative stability, when it was given an 11-year Charter in 2016, have now been well and truly shattered.

As you will read elsewhere in this Bulletin, the challenges to the corporation are coming thick and fast. The Government has announced a consultation on whether non-payment of the licence fee should be decriminalised. Various Government figures have questioned the principle of a compulsory licence fee in the age of proliferating services and platforms. The current licence fee settlement lasts until 31 March 2022, although the principle of the licence fee is embodied in the Charter. The new chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee, who is a long-term critic of the BBC, has announced that his committee will be undertaking a root and branch review of the BBC and its funding; and Ofcom will be launching its statutory review of public service broadcasting. Add to that that the BBC will soon be implementing its new policy on free licences for the over 75s, which will limit the concession to those who need it most, and we can see that the corporation is facing something of a perfect storm. The BBC also needs to find a new director-general, as Lord Hall has announced that he will be stepping down in the summer, after seven years in the role.

The first issue is that of decriminalisation, the Government having announced a relatively short consultation, with responses due by 1 April. The case for and against decriminalisation was thoroughly examined in 2015, in a review commissioned by then secretary of state John Whittingdale. It concluded that decriminalisation would not be appropriate. It would encourage avoidance, which would be unfair to the vast majority who do pay; it could actually lead to greater fines for non-payers under civil law, and it is estimated that decriminalisation would lead to a loss of at least £200m in annual revenues to the BBC.

The cost to the BBC of implementing even the more limited concession for over 75s is estimated at about £250m per year. And these costs come after a period of years when the BBC's revenues have been steadily undermined by various Government initiatives. New research by the VLV shows that the BBC has lost, in real terms, the equivalent of about £1bn or 30% of its public funding for UK services in the last decade. The latest impact of these cuts can be seen in the announcement that BBC news is cutting 450 posts as part of an £80m savings drive.

Of course the BBC sometimes gets things wrong. There are always efficiencies to be made and waste to be eliminated. We pay for the BBC and it is right that it is subject to constant scrutiny and challenge. However, no organisation can withstand a constant chipping away of its finances on this scale without suffering significant damage and it is listeners and viewers who will suffer.

The VLV believes that the mixed ecology of public service broadcasting in the UK, with the commercially funded ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 and the publicly funded BBC, has served the nation and its citizens well. It is admired around the world. The plethora of new services made possible by technology and providing greater choice are to be welcomed. But they do not undermine the case for public service broadcasting providing British-made programming tailored to UK audiences, developing UK talent and, most importantly, offering trusted and regulated news and current affairs in an era of misinformation.

The BBC is the cornerstone of PSB in the UK. It plays a vital role in our civil society. It is small by comparison with the large global players. Diminish it further and we will have lost something unique for ever.

We will of course be discussing these and other issues at our Spring Conference on 30 April. I look forward to seeing many of you there. Your support for public service broadcasting, for the BBC and for the VLV has never been more important.

Colin Browne, Chairman of VLV

STREAMING SERVICES LAUNCH



The UK subscription streaming service BritBox, a joint venture between the BBC and ITV, launched in November. BritBox subscribers pay £5.99 per month for advertising-free access to a huge archive of UK-made shows.

Programmes move to BritBox after they have dropped off the iPlayer or ITV Hub, while Channel 4 and Channel 5 are also providing content. ITV's chief executive, Dame Carolyn McCall, told the VLV Autumn Conference that the service was 'not trying to rival Netflix... we are totally complementary to it'. The move comes amid increasing competition in the streaming market. Apple TV+ launched in November, while the Disney+ service is set to launch in the UK on 24 March.

LICENCE FEE CONSULTATION

The government has launched a consultation into the potential decriminalisation of non-payment of the television licence fee. It is asking whether an alternative civil enforcement scheme would be 'fairer and more proportionate'. The BBC opposes any change to the present regime, pointing to research showing it could lose £200m from decriminalisation. The VLV will be responding to the consultation, which closes on 1 April.

The issue was examined as recently as 2015, when a government-commissioned review by David Perry QC backed the existing system. Perry said the regime in place 'represents a broadly fair and proportionate response to the problem of licence fee evasion and provides good value for money both for licence fee payers and taxpayers'. Those convicted of evading payment of the licence fee can be fined up to £1,000 – but the average imposed by magistrates is £176. Only if people breach court orders to pay their fines is there a risk of imprisonment – just five people were jailed in connection with evasion in 2018.

RED BUTTON TEXT REPRIEVE



The BBC has suspended the closure of text services on the red button, following protests against the move. Text services – but not broadcast services – were due to be withdrawn from the end of

January. But the BBC said it would look at concerns about the proposal's impact on elderly people and people with disabilities. It said it would make a fresh decision in the spring.

GILLIAN REYNOLDS CBE

Congratulations to the *Sunday Times* radio critic Gillian Reynolds, who was made a CBE in the new year's honours list. A friend of the VLV, Gillian has been writing incisively about radio for more than 50 years, first at the *Guardian* and then for 42 years at the *Daily Telegraph*, before moving to the *Sunday Times* in 2018.

TIMES TO MOVE INTO RADIO

The *Times* is to launch a speech radio station later in the year, in a move widely seen a potential threat to BBC Radio 4 and 5 Live. The station would be broadcast nationally on digital radio – and therefore be subject to Ofcom rules on impartiality – as well as online. The station has already pulled off a major coup in hiring the BBC's deputy political editor, John Pienaar. The *Times*' parent company, Rupert Murdoch's News UK, is already a significant player in the UK commercial radio market, owning TalkSport, TalkRadio and Virgin Radio. Times Radio's launch director, Stig Abell, is the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* and a regular presenter of Radio 4's *Front Row*.

BBC REGIONAL JOBS PUSH

The BBC has set out plans to move more jobs outside London, including opening a new tech hub in Newcastle. Director-general Tony Hall said he wanted at least two thirds of staff to be based outside London by 2027, up from 52% today and just a third a decade ago. Some 150 jobs will be moved to Bristol, while Salford will gain more digital posts, Hall added. The BBC initiative comes as Channel 4 aims to broaden its footprint across the UK, opening a new national HQ in Leeds and creative hubs in Glasgow and Bristol.

RICHARD LINDLEY, 1936-2019



Richard Lindley, a former chairman of the VLV, died at the age of 83 in November. Richard had a long and highly distinguished career as a broadcaster at both ITV and the BBC. He later chaired the VLV between October 2008 and January 2010. He and his wife, Carole Stone, continued to be great supporters of the VLV and regular attendees at our conferences.

Richard's TV career began in 1962 at the ITV company ABC. He joined ITN in 1964 and became a well-known foreign correspondent, reporting from the war zones of Vietnam, Biafra and Bangladesh. His obituaries recounted that on one occasion in Bangladesh he passed up the chance to shoot exclusive footage of the grim fate that was about to befall the prisoners of a guerrilla leader, as he feared the presence of journalists was encouraging violence. 'This moral awareness, along with his modesty, reserved manner and integrity, made Lindley revered by those who worked with him,' the *Guardian* wrote.

In 1973, he joined the BBC, where he worked for *Panorama* for 15 years. Among his many assignments for the programme he interviewed Saddam Hussein, making him the first western TV journalist to do so. He interviewed Margaret Thatcher during the Falklands War and became *Panorama*'s presenter.

He later returned to ITV, reporting for Thames TV's *This Week*, presenting ITN's World News and making special reports for *News at Ten*. He briefly worked at the Independent Broadcasting Authority, then the regulator of commercial television. He also wrote books about the history of *Panorama* and ITN.

AUTUMN CONFERENCE 2019: PSB UNDER THREAT

There was a spectre hanging over the VLV's Autumn Conference on 20 November: the threat posed to public service broadcasting by a handful of giant US corporations. Sir David Clementi, the BBC's chairman, said that Netflix and Amazon now had a combined share of 55% of the video on demand market in the UK, while the BBC iPlayer's share had fallen to below 20%. 'We are now in competition for eyeballs with all the global players, all the streaming services, and for advertising we're competing with Facebook and Google,' added Dame Carolyn McCall, the chief executive of ITV.

Dame Carolyn, who appeared in conversation in the day's opening session, said the 2003 Communications Act was no longer 'fit for purpose' and that sorting out the future of public service broadcasting should be the top priority for the Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport in the new parliament (the conference took place three weeks before the general election).



She highlighted the increasing difficulty that public service broadcasters such as ITV now face in being noticed by viewers who no longer find programmes through a conventional electronic programme guide (EPG). 'How PSBs are seen on a screen and found is one of our biggest threats and keeps me awake at night,' she said. 'If you can't discover it in the first place, you can't watch it.' Many new television sets allow viewers to bypass channels and EPGs altogether. 'The way people get to discover content is being presented to you by manufacturers but also through algorithms, and that disintermediates us and takes us out of the picture,' she said.

This is an issue that will require legislation to deal with, as Ofcom has made clear to the government. Speaking later in the day, Lord Gilbert of Panteg, the chairman of the Lords communications and digital select committee, echoed Dame Carolyn's concerns, and pointed out that ITV's willingness to continue as public service broadcaster depended on the prominence its programmes are given on EPGs. 'As the commercial pressures around ITV build, unless you do find a solution around prominence, it may be totally rational for ITV to walk away from PSB obligations,' he said. 'Don't have another series of reviews. Ofcom and the government have got to come to a decision.'

Dame Carolyn and Sir David both spoke of the constraints placed on traditional broadcasters by the current regulatory environment. Dame Carolyn pointed out that neither the streaming giants nor Google and Facebook were regulated. Sir David said that the 'tremendous shifts in the marketplace need to be accompanied by a significant shift in the way we think about broadcast regulation'. He said regulators needed to place more emphasis on the competitive context in which broadcasters operate and act only when there is evidence of harm.



'Are we running the risk of tying ourselves up in red tape and regulation at a time when all media organisations need to be fast and agile?' he asked. 'Commissioners are always having to think about regulatory quotas before they think about making great programmes.' He recalled the outgoing Ofcom chief executive Sharon White's suggestion [at the RTS convention in Cambridge] that the BBC hadn't quite come to terms with being regulated by Ofcom. He said he disagreed – and in a reference to Dame Sharon's new job chairing the John Lewis partnership, joked that the BBC had 'never been knowingly under-regulated'. He said he thought Ofcom had been a good regulator, but observed that the regulatory system 'remains a linear construct in a digital age'.

Later in the day the conference was given an insight into the diverse habits of TV viewers as they get to grips with the rapidly developing technological landscape that Dame Carolyn had been describing. Professor Matt Hills of Huddersfield University outlined research that showed different kinds of 'default' TV, by which he meant the different ways in which viewers now embark on watching TV. Some viewers still relied on scrolling through the EPG, while others memorised three-digit channel numbers to find the content they wanted, he said. Another category of viewers defaulted to viewing programmes they had recorded, while another group used Netflix or Sky Q as a 'one world' entry point.

Professor Hills also said that some viewers now associated Netflix and Amazon with the values of public service broadcasters. Netflix was known for its high-end dramas and was moving into documentary too, he said. Sophie Jones, head of corporate relations at Channel 4, said that while Netflix was spending huge amounts of money and some of their programming was UK-focused, public service broadcasters were making content that had 'resonance and relevance here'.



The conference also heard from John Humphrys, who reflected on his long career in broadcasting, including 32 years presenting Radio 4's *Today* programme. He spoke of the 'life-changing' experience of covering the Aberfan tragedy as a young reporter and what the lies told afterwards by the National Coal Board had taught him: 'If you are going to be a journalist, you have to be deeply, deeply sceptical of authority, wherever it is and whatever form it takes. Do not trust. Trust has to be earned.'

WRC 2019 REPORT: A FUTURE FOR FREE TV?

Every four years the World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC) is convened to review the current use of spectrum and to plan for its future. This matters to supporters of public service broadcasting, as part of the spectrum is used for the delivery of digital terrestrial television (DTT), which means Freeview in the UK.

The latest WRC, held in Egypt in November, has not fundamentally changed the way that spectrum for TV will be used in the coming years. But given the continuing pressure from mobile companies to gain access to the spectrum allocated to DTT, defenders of public service broadcasting need to remain vigilant.

Since its launch in 1998, DTT has enabled an explosive growth in the number of TV services available on the Freeview platform and delivers them using less spectrum than was used for analogue TV – the resulting ‘digital dividend’ enabled the allocation of spectrum to support new mobile communication services.

But mobile companies remain hungry for more spectrum to support the growth of communications using so-called 4G and 5G technologies that conform to global standards. It is important for the success of this technology that globally harmonised spectrum bands are made available – but achieving that goal is difficult because any re-allocation process takes a long time.

Freeview currently has use of the spectrum for television in the 470-694 MHz band. The WRC in 2015 agreed to allocate spectrum in the higher 700 band to the mobiles, resulting in the relocation of broadcasting from the 700s to the lower 600s.

However, it is clear from the outcome of WRC 2019 that, despite no imminent changes being planned, this matter will return to the agenda at the next conference in 2023, with the mobile groups claiming that their 5G technology could, at a price, provide an alternative to existing DTT broadcasting as well as much extended mobile data use and broadband availability. This claim would need to be demonstrated beyond any doubt before broadcasters would be prepared to consider switching from DTT to 5G. The consequences of such a switch for viewers and the consumer electronics industry would also be very significant, involving new aerials and receivers and a lengthy transition period during which simulcasting may be required.

The secure use of spectrum for DTT remains crucially important in delivering public service broadcasting to many millions of homes. It means that the core public service channels can be received via a rooftop aerial on a free to view basis, without any need for a satellite, cable or broadband subscription. This allows for truly universal access to public service television, without the intervention of any provider or commercial interest.

It is worth noting that the UK’s position in this global debate has already been affected by Brexit: as of February Ofcom is no longer a member of the EU’s Radio Spectrum Policy Group or Radio Spectrum Committee.

BBC SCOTLAND CHANNEL: A SUCCESSFUL FIRST YEAR

By Robert Beveridge

The BBC Scotland channel recently celebrated its first birthday. Broadcasting mainly from 7pm until midnight, it provides viewers with a variety of programmes, around half being new content and 95% of Scottish origin. A long overdue step to respond more fully to the needs of audiences in Scotland, it is designed to invest in the creative economy of Scotland and to give voice to a Scottish perspective at a time when it is ever more important that the nations of the UK are able to speak to one another, whatever the outcome might be of those exchanges.

In 2019, the channel – which is available on Freeview only in Scotland, but across the UK on cable, satellite and the iPlayer – reached on average 17% of Scotland’s population each week. iPlayer requests in Scotland increased from some 14.5 million in 2018 to 30.5 million in 2019, many due to the new channel.

Importantly, the channel has achieved notable success in reaching younger audiences. The documentary *Jamie Genevieve #unfiltered* did well both on linear television and on the iPlayer, with more than 200,000 requests to view, more than 70% of which came from the accounts of 16-34 year olds. On social media, there were over 375,000 views to clips, mainly by under-35s. In its first quarter on air, the channel achieved the lowest age profile of any BBC TV service. This shows that the young do enjoy BBC content, and the BBC as a whole can learn from BBC Scotland’s success in this area.

Programmes have included a range of documentaries, delivered in entertaining style. *Darren McGarvey’s Scotland* provided a trenchant and compassionate take on the lives of the underprivileged that reminded me of the early Ken Loach. Programmes such as *Getting Hitched*, *Asian Style* and *Murder Trial: The Disappearance of Margaret Fleming* (pictured) found substantial audiences and reflected a modern Scotland.



Despite success in terms of high audience appreciation, some programmes have been criticised for low viewing figures. This is where the public purposes of the BBC need to be borne in mind. Performance needs to be judged using a number of factors; audience size needs to be balanced against public value and high appreciation. Moreover, the channel’s annual budget of £32m per annum has to be spread thinly.

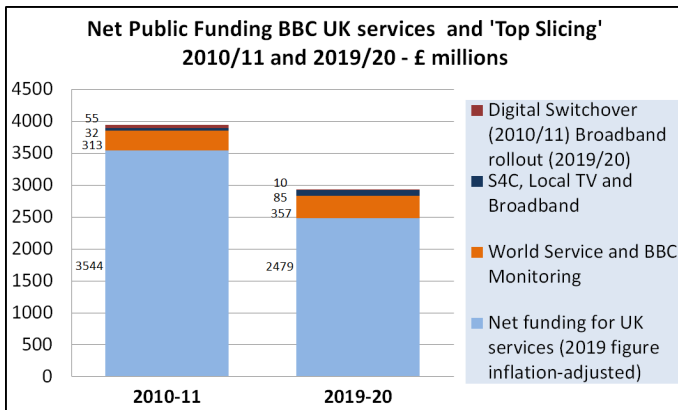
If further cuts are sought at the BBC, this new channel might be at risk – but if the UK government is serious about a better future post-Brexit, it would be quite an own goal to allow something to happen that would further alienate viewers in Scotland and reduce creative investment outside the M25.

Robert Beveridge is the VLV trustee for Scotland and Professor of Media Policy and Regulation at the University of Sassari in Sardinia

BBC: AFTER A DECADE OF CUTS, SERIOUS DANGERS LIE AHEAD

The VLV is concerned that only three years into its Charter, the BBC is facing an existential crisis. The government appears to be considering a full-scale review of how the corporation is funded.

To understand the challenge the BBC faces, the VLV has analysed BBC funding and found that in real, inflation-adjusted terms, public funding available for BBC UK TV, radio and online services has dropped by 30% since 2010. This analysis examines only public funding (the licence fee plus government grants); it excludes the BBC's commercial income.



BBC Public Funding 2010-2020

Public funding for the BBC in 2010/11 was £3.95bn, with £3.54bn of that spent on services for UK audiences. In 2019/20 the BBC's public funding will be £3.65bn, with £3.2bn for UK services. The BBC Annual Report will confirm the 2019/20 figures, but the BBC has said that VLV's figures are in line with expectations. Once inflation is taken into account, 2019/20 net public funding is equivalent to £2.48bn in 2010 money – just 70% of the 2010/11 budget at a time when production and distribution costs have risen considerably.

The fall in funding for UK services is due to a combination of factors: the TV licence fee was frozen between 2010 and 2017; in 2013, a number of new obligations were imposed on the licence fee: paying for broadband rollout, S4C, Local TV and BBC Monitoring (which between them cost as much as £250m per annum); from 2014 the BBC began paying for the World Service, which was previously funded by the Foreign Office; and since 2018 the DWP has gradually removed funding for free TV licences for the over 75s. Although the BBC stopped paying for Local TV in 2017 and the broadband rollout subsidy comes to an end this year, the other obligations remain. Once income figures are inflation-adjusted, the net value of public funding for the BBC's UK TV, radio and online services has declined by 30% between 2010/11 and 2019/20.

The BBC has mitigated declines in funding through its commercial success and efficiency measures, but if commercial success becomes a primary driver this could undermine the BBC's public service remit and any further cuts are likely to undermine the quality of its services.

The VLV identifies three principal threats to the BBC:

Decriminalisation of licence fee evasion: The 2015 Perry review concluded that if non-payment of the TV licence became a civil offence, fines for non-payers and

the number of offenders would rise and the cost to enforce the new system would also increase. Although the government decided to retain the existing system, it is now consulting on this again. If decriminalisation goes ahead, the cost to the BBC could spiral – by at least £200m per year but we believe the cost to the BBC could be far higher.

Subscription: The government is reported to be considering turning the BBC into a subscription service. This would end the BBC's century-old role as a civic institution devoted to public service rather than commercial gain and, crucially, would undermine its universality. VLV strongly opposes subscription and considers the universality of the BBC to be fundamental to its remit. The value of BBC services goes far beyond that of any other subscription services, which are commercially driven and are mostly designed to provide entertainment.

Political pressure: The BBC is governed by its Charter with multi-year financial settlements that aim to minimise interference from government in its day to day operations. The current debate exposes a weakness in the system. The VLV has long argued that the negotiation of BBC funding settlements should be more transparent and subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The BBC now faces a tough three years:

- The government is currently consulting on the decriminalisation of evasion; if this goes ahead, changes are likely in 2022.
- New BBC funding negotiations are due in 2021 for a settlement starting in April 2022. The VLV fears that the BBC may be forced to re-instate free TV licences for all over 75s, which would mean a further £500m reduction in income.
- From 2022, a 'mid-term' review of the BBC, set out in the Charter, could take place. This review was intended to focus on BBC governance arrangements and not its funding model. It has been reported that the review will be led by John Whittingdale MP, the former culture secretary who has recently returned to office as a DCMS minister, and who has previously been a supporter of contestable funding for public service content.

VLV will be following events closely and covering these issues at its conference on 30 April. We will prepare submissions for all relevant consultations and engage with the DCMS, parliamentarians and Lords' and Commons' select committees.

Ultimately the future of the BBC is in our hands. We need to ensure that any changes to the BBC funding model are properly debated in a public and transparent way. Whatever the outcome of current deliberations, we need to ensure the BBC remains relevant to the UK population and is sustainable so that future generations can benefit from it in the way we have benefitted throughout our lives.

What can you do?

We encourage you to respond to the consultation on decriminalisation on the DCMS website.

We also urge you to write to your MP and other parliamentarians to make the government aware that the BBC is valued and we do not want it to be ruined, either by incremental cuts or through more significant changes to its funding model.

THE BBC: A PUBLIC GOOD SERVING ALL AUDIENCES

By Bob Usherwood

According to the former culture secretary Nicky Morgan, people now spend three times as much time watching subscription services such as Netflix as they do watching the BBC iPlayer. Whether or not this is true, it is crass to define the BBC's services in such a limited way. Its nine television channels, internet TV service, 10 national and 40 local radio stations and comprehensive website are just the obvious signifiers of its impact on British society and beyond. The BBC also contributes to our culture, democracy, economy and national infrastructure. Through its mission to serve all audiences through impartial, high quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain, it benefits those who do not use its services as well as those who do. Some now argue that BBC channels should become subscription services. This would hit the poor hardest and render it impossible for the BBC to fulfil its mission to serve all audiences.

Democracy requires citizens to have access to diverse, accurate and unbiased sources of news and information. The pro-Conservative bias of the national print media is well known. There are now increasingly worrying signs that the impartiality of our broadcast media could be tested. On radio, LBC seems to have a line-up of mainly right-wing presenters, while the Murdoch-owned News Corp plans to launch a *Times* radio station; presumably this would have to abide by Ofcom's broadcasting code and its requirements for impartiality, as LBC is expected to do, but it is a potential sign of norms shifting. The BBC also helps democracy to flourish at the local level through its radio stations, which report community matters that commercial radio ignores.

Radio 4's *In Our Time* recently reminded me of HG Wells' maxim: 'Civilisation is in a race between education and catastrophe.' We are beginning to pay the price for the political acceptance of fakery and falsehood, and the populist dismissal of education and expertise. As recent events show, ignorance and intolerance go hand in hand and can lead to catastrophic social and political consequences. By providing high quality educational material across a range of platforms, the BBC is a major force in supporting civilization in the race that Wells described.

The former BBC chairman Lord Grade recently described the BBC as 'the nursery for talent in this country'. It is doubtful whether ground-breaking shows such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* or *The Office* would have appeared on British television without the BBC. And who else provides radio drama? The great dramatist Harold Pinter was helped on his way by BBC editors who encouraged innovation, and young writers enjoy similar support today. Nurturing talent and innovation are less obviously associated with Netflix. It is unlikely that products designed for international consumption and created using data analytics following commercial imperatives will reflect the concerns, diversity and attitudes of UK audiences as accurately and authentically as BBC productions.

Bob Usherwood is a trustee of the VLV and former Professor of Librarianship at the University of Sheffield

THE BBC'S OBLIGATION TO CHILDREN AS CITIZENS

By Jeanette Steemers

Few people would have spotted Ofcom's consultation on BBC children's news and first-run originations late last year, but the *Newsround* proposals represent a short-sighted attempt to offload what are seen as troublesome restrictions, without actually thinking of the long-term consequences for how the BBC serves children as citizens. The BBC asked Ofcom to change its operating licence to cut first-run children's news broadcasts on the CBBC children's channel from 85 hours to 35 hours a year, reducing its broadcast news bulletin *Newsround* to one edition a day.

The BBC's argument is that the changes and reallocation of resources will allow it to focus more on the distribution of news on its website and the iPlayer, but there is no guarantee that *Newsround* will work online because the plans contain no clear distribution strategy. Even Ofcom repeatedly suggests it is not convinced that children will use or find *Newsround* online, which begs the question: why accept the proposals and not seek to push for better ones that can be properly tested?

The BBC and Ofcom want to implement the changes hastily this spring. If a more considered approach were adopted that tested options and also crucially consulted children, a more informed decision might be possible. No one is saying that *Newsround* should not change, but these have to be changes that secure news content for children in the long term.

While it is true that children's viewing of linear scheduled television is declining, the BBC's proposals lack sufficient evidence to support them. The BBC's multiplatform strategy for *Newsround* focuses on 20 daily text-based, video or interactive stories on its website and the iPlayer, but lacks detail about what type of content the BBC intends to make for online distribution and how it is going to promote it so that children can actually find it. Without a plan to improve reach, including better use of YouTube and other social media, the reduction in hours seems short-sighted and risky – particularly as Ofcom is not stipulating quantitative measures for online news provision of *Newsround*, or making requirements about its prominence on the website and iPlayer. Former *Newsround* editor Sinead Rocks has argued that it needs more prominence, not less.

As children's news is a key part of the BBC's public service commitment to foster and support children's citizenship, the BBC's proposal is disappointing, especially at a time when children and young people are highly engaged with a wide range of issues including climate change, Brexit and education, as well as more personal issues such as school uniforms, healthy eating and bullying. The proposals should not slip through without a serious debate.

Jeanette Steemers is a trustee of the VLV and Professor of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College, London. Her submission to the Ofcom consultation, in conjunction with Cindy Carter and Maire Messenger Davies, as well as the VLV's own submission, can be found on the Ofcom website.

NEW TRUSTEES

We are delighted to welcome two new trustees to the board of the VLV, both voted in at the AGM on 20 November 2019. All our trustees are volunteers and without them the VLV would not be able to carry on its important work.



Sophie Chalk is already well known to VLV members. She previously served as a trustee for four years until 2014, when she became the VLV's policy adviser, a role that she held until June last year. Sophie has worked in broadcasting policy for 15 years. Before that, she was a producer/director and reporter in factual television and radio and news. In 1998 she set up the independent production company Rooftop Productions to specialise in making popular programmes about the developing world, including the BAFTA-nominated *Rooted for Five*.



Sarita Malik is Professor of Media, Culture and Communications in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at Brunel University London. She has published widely on issues of diversity, cultural representation and cultural policy, with expertise in diversity and public service broadcasting. Her books include *Community Filmmaking and Cultural Diversity* and *Adjusting the Contrast: British Television and Constructs of 'Race'*. She has recently published on creative diversity as a form of cultural policy, podcasting and anti-racism, and urban genres and screen representation.

Diary Dates

VLV's 37th Spring Conference Thursday 30 April 2020

*The Geological Society,
Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG
including*

The VLV Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting 2019

To book a ticket, complete the enclosed form or go to www.vlv.org.uk

The conference will be followed by The VLV Members Forum

VLV's 37th Autumn Conference Tuesday 24 November 2020

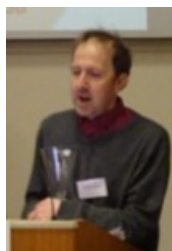
*The Geological Society,
Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG*

THE VLV AWARDS — VOTE NOW

Included for members with this bulletin are the ballot papers for the VLV Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting covering programmes broadcast during 2019. These again include the award for international content sponsored by the International Broadcasting Trust. We are very grateful for their support.

This year the awards will be hosted by comedian Steve Punt, presenter of BBC Radio 4's *The Now Show*, which won last year's award for best radio drama or comedy programme.

This year we have introduced a separate award for best radio drama



and a new award for best comedy programme across radio and television. There will also be a new award for best podcast, the winner to be chosen by the trustees.

The VLV Awards are an opportunity to celebrate the wealth of excellent programmes across all channels and networks broadcast in 2019, a quality and diversity reflected in the range of nominations from VLV members and, in the case of the IBT-sponsored award, from IBT members. Winners particularly value these awards, first introduced some 30 years ago, because they are chosen by the people who really matter, their listeners and viewers.

Please take a few minutes to vote for those programmes and individuals you have particularly appreciated. You have until **23 March 2020** to return your completed ballot papers.

VLV 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

PLEASE USE BLOCK CAPITALS

Name: _____

Address: _____

Post Code: _____ Tel: _____ Email: _____

OR to pay by Credit Card please complete the form below or telephone 01474 338716

Name of Cardholder _____

Card type: Mastercard ☐ Visa ☐ Expiry date / Issue No. CVS (last 3 digits of security on reverse of card)

Card No. / / / Amount £ _____ Signature of Cardholder _____

I would like to pay by standing order ☐ please send me a form.

giftaid it I would like to GiftAid my payment ☐ please send me a form