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HOW DO PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTERS MAKE A CASE FOR THEMSELVES?

An Analysis of BBC's "Charter Manifestos"

Alessandro D'Arma

ABSTRACT

As publicly funded organizations operating in a sector characterized by ever-greater private-sector provision, public service broadcasters need to build a robust case for their continuing legitimacy. This article examines the discursive strategies of the BBC in the United Kingdom in the context of the last three Royal Charter reviews. It shows that since the early 2000s, and particularly during the most recent Charter review, the BBC has deployed influential policy ideas on the creative economy to build a case that in keeping with the times emphasizes its economic contribution as well as its more traditional role in fostering political and cultural citizenship.

Keywords: Public service media (PSM), Public service broadcasting (PSB), BBC, broadcasting policy, media policy

Making a persuasive case for their legitimacy has become over time a more pressing and challenging task for public service broadcasting (PSB) organizations seeking to protect their position.[1] The end of "spectrum scarcity" has long undermined the technological case for PSB. Since the 1990s, new communications technologies and neoliberal policies have brought about a new market-driven era of digital plenty. Against this backdrop, free-market advocates and private-sector competitors have argued that there is no need for large PSB institutions funded through taxation. For their part, PSBs have had to reconsider their role in light of evolving political, social, market, and technological realities, and make a case in terms that are relevant for contemporary conditions and discourses. Arguably, at its core, the story of PSB around the world in the last 30 years has revolved

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1. See Picard.

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around a battle for legitimization and, ultimately, survival. As publicly funded organizations operating in a sector characterized by disruptive technological change and ever greater commercial provision, and in an age dominated by a political ideology that accords primacy to the market, PSBs have had to work hard to spell out their contribution to society in order to try to secure their future.

How, then, do PSB organizations make a case for themselves? And, given a changing context, to what extent and in what ways have the discursive strategies they deploy to legitimize their existence changed over time? In order to address these questions, this article considers the case of the BBC in the United Kingdom. What makes the BBC a particularly relevant case is that, as the world's most prominent PSB, the BBC has traditionally exerted a strong influence on how other PSB organizations, notwithstanding the great variety of national conditions and contexts, have articulated their vision and strategy.[2] Much of the literature on PSB policies examines *government* policy, even when the analytical focus is placed on shifts in *discourses* on PSB. By contrast, there has been a relative neglect of the discursive strategies of PSB organizations themselves.[3] Yet, surely the ways in which these organizations (re)define their purpose and role in society can have a significant bearing on shared understandings of PSBs' raison d'etre and ultimately on actual policy decisions and outcomes.

The BBC is established under a Royal Charter that is renewed at intervals of about ten years. The renewal of the Royal Charter provides a "routinized political window"[4] or a "focusing event"[5] that moves the question about the future of the BBC to the top of the media policy agenda. In seeking to secure its future on favorable terms, the BBC participates in the policy debate during Charter reviews through a range of public pronouncements, including speeches by its director general and other senior managers, submissions to public consultations and parliamentary hearings. The most fully elaborated and "official" statement of the BBC's purpose and vision, however, can be found in what will be referred to here as the "BBC Charter manifestos." These are mission statements published by the BBC shortly before or after the publication by government of a Green Paper triggering the Charter review process. In Norman Fairclough's terms,[6] the BBC's

2. This point is made, among others, by Martin and Lowe, 22.
3. See, though, O'Malley; Born; Van den Bulck; and Larsen.
4. Howlett and Ramesh, 137.
5. Cairney, 234.
6. Fairclough.

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Charter manifestos are "genres" within the BBC's "order of discourse," that is, they are texts sharing distinctive properties, which make them especially suitable for comparison. Their core purpose is to put forward a compelling case for the societal benefits delivered by the BBC and to outline key proposals for the future. This article presents the results of a close reading of the BBC's last three Charter manifestos, released more than 10 years apart from each other, over the span of nearly 25 years (1992–2015), a period marked by profound technological, political, and market changes. It compares and contrasts *British Bold Creative: The BBC's Programmes and Services in the Next Charter* (2015),[7] published in September 2015 as part of the yearlong process of BBC Charter review (2016) with *Extending Choice: The BBC's Role in the New Broadcasting Age* (1992)[8] and *Building Public Value: Renewing the BBC for a Digital World* (2004),[9] the manifestos produced by the BBC in the context of the previous two Charter reviews.[10]

It is important to emphasize at this point that no claim is made here about the significance of the BBC's Charter manifestos for actual policy outcomes. Irrespective of their policy impact, however, for the purpose of this study, their significance lies in the fact that, as some of the BBC's key strategy documents (produced under the same institutional circumstances, namely as part of the BBC's Royal Charter renewal process) they are particularly well suited to reveal how the BBC's "line of defense" has evolved over time.

The analytical approach employed here is qualitative thematic analysis, defined by Lioness Ayres as "a descriptive strategy that facilitates the search for patterns"[11] within a corpus of texts through an iterative process of data reduction known as thematic coding, beginning with the researcher coming up with a list of themes anticipated to be found in the data and then involving a process of analytic induction. As with all qualitative (text-based) research, this approach entails a high degree of analytical *interpretation* on the part of the researcher. In this study, the

7. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *British Bold Creative*.

8. BBC, *Extending Choice*.

9. BBC, *Building Public Value*.

10. A terminological clarification is in order at the outset. Given the historical perspective adopted in this study, "public service broadcasting," rather than "public service media," is used throughout. The latter is a label that is increasingly commonly attached to PSB organizations nowadays engaged in the delivery of a range of online media services. It is also relevant to note (given the focus here on BBC's *discursive* strategies) that in none of its Charter manifestos, not even in the most recent one (2015), the BBC refers to itself as "public service media" organization.

11. Ayres, 868.

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three BBC manifestos were subject to multiple readings with the aim of identifying common elements as well as noticeable differences or shifts in emphasis over time. A theme was considered as such if it captured something of significance in relation to the research questions. As will be discussed here, the following four main themes were identified: (1) narratives on the impact of technological change, (2) arguments (traditional vs. new) deployed in support of the BBC, (3) discourses on PSB quality and distinctiveness, (4) the BBC's relationship with the wider industry. A quantitative lexical analysis of BBC's Charter manifestos was also performed with the dual aim of *informing* and *supporting* the qualitative analysis.

The article is organized as follows. The section "Theoretical Framework: Policy, Actors, Context, and Ideas" introduces the theoretical framework drawing on approaches to political analysis that foreground the role that ideas and "casual stories" play in policy making. This is followed by a section that briefly outlines the spectrum of ideological positions on PSB and discusses the growing influence over time of neoliberal thinking. After attending to the task of situating the three BBC manifestos in their historical context, the remainder of the article presents the main analysis. First, the three manifestos are subject to a close reading, each in turn. The discussion section that follows, then, compares and contrasts them in relation to four main themes. The last section summarizes and briefly considers the implications and wider relevance of the study.

Theoretical Framework: Policy, Actors, Context, and Ideas

This study is situated theoretically within approaches to political analysis that conceive of policy making as a struggle over the interpretation of policy problems, for social reality (in keeping with a social constructivist ontology) is presumed to be neither directly nor unambiguously accessible to actors.[12] Taking a social constructionist view of policy making thus means acknowledging that "our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas; those ideas, in turn, are created, changed and fought over in politics."[13] This is an intuitive and yet important theoretical insight. As put by Craig Parsons, the basic claim is that "how actors

12. Fisher.

13. Stone, "Causal Stories," 282.

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think about policy matters, and their thinking is not just a mechanistic function of uninterpreted conditions around them."[14] A focus on ideas, it is contended, provides "richer explanations of politics," for "ideas shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies, and are the currency we use to communicate about politics."[15] This article draws in particular on the work of two leading figures in the field, Colin Hay[16] and Deborah Stone.[17]

For Hay, ideas provide "the point of mediation between actors and their environment."[18] Actors (whether individual or collective) are seen by Hay as acting broadly purposefully and strategically, seeking "to realize certain complex, contingent, and constantly changing goals."[19] Actors operate within a "densely structured context"[20] which places constraints not only on their strategic choices ("given a specific context, only certain courses of strategic action are available to actors"[21]) but also on their discursive constructions of the context, that is, upon the ideas they hold about it ("for particular ideas, narratives and paradigms to continue to provide cognitive templates through which actors interpret the world, they must retain a certain resonance with those actors' direct and mediated experience"[22]). Material conditions, including political factors, then shape not only actors' strategies but also how actors make sense of the environment within which they find themselves and discursively construct it. However, the direction of influence is two-way. Ideas, Hay contends, can also have an independent effect on the context. This is a key theoretical proposition in ideational approaches. Hay reasons that if "it is the ideas that actors hold about the context in which they find themselves rather than the context itself which informs the way in which actors behave,"[23] then through the strategic action they inform, ideas (no matter how well-informed or genuinely held), "exert their own effect upon the development of the context over time."[24]

14. Parsons, 446.
15. Béland and Cox, 3.
16. Hay, *Political Analysis*; "Constructivist Institutionalism."
17. Stone, *Policy Paradox*; "Casual Stories."
18. Hay, *Political Analysis*, 209–10.
19. Hay, "Constructivist Institutionalism," 63.
20. Hay, *Political Analysis*, 213.
21. Ibid., 209.
22. Ibid., 212.
23. Hay and Rosamund, 148.
24. Hay, *Political Analysis*, 214.

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In seeking to realize their strategic intentions, actors can draw upon a repertoire of discursive resources that exist independently of them. At any given time and place, it is possible to identify certain discourses that have gained particular credibility and influence, and thus shape what actors perceive to be "feasible, legitimate, possible, and [even] desirable."[25] Actors draw upon such influential discourses either out of calculus, that is for opportunistic reasons, or out of belief, because an idea is genuinely perceived as reflecting reality. However, in a move that tempers the structuralism implicit in this position, Hay also acknowledges the creative and active role of agents, for "it is actors, after all, who fashion understandings and offer legitimations of their conduct, even if they do so in discursive circumstances which are not [entirely] of their own choosing."[26]

While sharing with Hay the same ontological stance on the nature of policy making, Deborah Stone however operates at a more microlevel of analysis. Her work dissects the role that "casual stories" play in how policy issues are fought over in policy politics, and the rhetorical strategies deployed by actors in an effort to promote their favored courses of action. Central to this process, according to Stone, is problem definition, at its core "a matter of representation because a very description of a situation is a portrayal from only one of many points of view."[27] Definitions of policy problems usually "have a narrative structure."[28] Policy actors craft "stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, involving some change or transformation," and pitting "the forces of evil against the forces of good."[29] These stories are representation of the world that enable actors "to appear to be able to remedy the problem" and facilitate their efforts in alliance building. Stories are told through the use of numbers to authenticate the story and by deploying literary and rhetorical devices such as metaphors "to lead the audience ineluctably to a course of action."[30] Stone identifies two broad storylines that are "particularly prevalent in policy politics,"[31] namely, the story of decline (a situation has gotten worse) and the story of control (that is, how a seemingly out of control situation can in fact be controlled). A variation of the story of decline (used by the BBC, as we

25. Hay, "Constructivist Institutionalism," 65.
26. Hay and Rosamund, 151.
27. Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 133.
28. Ibid., 133.
29. Ibid., 138.
30. Ibid., 145.
31. Ibid., 138.

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shall see) is the "change-is-only-an-illusion" story. This story shows how contrary to a widely held view that a situation is improving, things in fact are going, or could go in the opposite direction, unless a certain course of action is taken. These two storyline types are "often woven together, with the story of decline serving as the stage setting and the impetus for the story of control."[32] In conceiving of policy stories as "tools of strategy," Stone contends that "policy makers as well as interest groups often create problems (in the artistic sense) as a context for the actions they want to take,"[33] and "represent the world in such a way as to make themselves, their skills and their favourite course of action necessary."[34]

To sum up, the theoretical framework sketched out here sees policy actors as operating within the boundaries of the prevalent political discourse, which can either facilitate or constrain their strategies. In seeking to realize their goals, actors draw upon influential discourses, sometimes creatively refashioning them to promote sympathetic policy outcomes, and craft stories in order to be able to portray themselves as the fixer of a problem. In turn, the ideas that actors draw upon to realize their goals can have material effects on the context through the strategic action they inform. These theoretical insights will inform the analysis of the discursive strategies deployed by the BBC in its Charter manifestos. Before doing this, the next two sections, "The Debate on PSB" and "Situating the BBC's Charter Manifestos", consider the ideological and historical context within which these texts must be situated.

The Debate on PSB

PSB has been the site of an ideological contestation ever since the late 1970s, when the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the introduction of new technologies of television distribution began to threaten the formerly secure position of PSBs. The traditional case for PSB rests on normative arguments around the role of broadcasting in fostering citizenship and democracy. Having reviewed a relevant body of policy and academic literature on PSB produced in the 1990s, Georgina Born and Tony Prosser concluded that there was a broad consensus on some core normative criteria

32. Ibid., 144–45.
33. Ibid., 162.
34. Ibid.

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for PSB which could be "distilled into three central principles,"[35] namely: (1) enhancing, developing and serving social, political, and cultural citizenship; (2) universality; and (3) quality of services and of output. The latter two, the authors argued, could be derived from the first one "in which they find their ultimate justification."[36] The universal service mission of PSBs has traditionally being understood as encompassing the goal of ensuring nationwide coverage as well as the provision of a wide range of programs catering for the needs of all citizens irrespective of their ability to pay. The principle of universality is closely linked with the progressive notion of equality. In the words of Nicholas Garnham, an early prominent critic of the marketization of western broadcasting systems, PSB is superior to the market "as a means of providing all citizens, whatever wealth or geographical location, *equal* access to a wide range of high-quality entertainment, information and education."[37] Quality, the other core normative criterion for PSB, has traditionally been an aspiration stated at the level of principles in PSBs' charters and other foundational documents, and it has been asserted rather than evidenced by PSB organizations. Arguments in support of PSB rooted in citizenship discourse have been described as the "social responsibility approach."[38] This orientation is perhaps best exemplified by the Council of Europe, an institution that has repeatedly called on its member states to promote the role of PSB.[39]

The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, an ideology that in the words of David Harvey "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market,"[40] has obviously posed a major threat to PSB. Karol Jakubowicz[41] describes a neoliberal approach to PSB as one that sees the market as the most effective mechanism for the satisfaction of the communication needs of both individuals and society. The implication is that PSB organizations should either be dismantled or made to conform to market rules (i.e., privatized). Technological advances have been used by neoliberal-minded opponents of PSB to support their arguments about the superiority of market-based mechanisms for the delivery of television and radio services. The removal of technical barriers at distribution level (the end of the

35. Born and Prosser, 670–71.
36. Ibid., 671.
37. Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 120 (emphasis added).
38. Donders and Van den Bulck.
39. Jakubowicz, 32.
40. Harvey, 3.
41. Jakubowicz, 31.

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so-called "spectrum scarcity"), it is claimed, has fundamentally weakened the case for PSB. According to Karen Donders and Hilde Van den Bulck, this is the "digital argument," which implies a "quasi-automatic causality between technological change on the one hand and the perceived necessity of policy change on the other hand"[42] (in the direction of giving free rein to market forces).

The "digital argument" has also been the chief argument against an expansive role for PSB deployed by a number of media economists working from a market failure theoretical perspective.[43] From this perspective, new technologies have transformed broadcasting, once a public (nonexcludable) good, into a private one. Further, the multiplication of media outlets and the consequent fragmentation of audiences have diminished other historic market failures (such as positive and negative externalities) that could once be used to justify PSB and other forms of pubic intervention in broadcasting markets. The conclusion is that public funding should be reduced and that PSB organizations should operate according to a narrower remit to supplement commercial provision. Jakubowicz refers to perspectives on PSB couched in market failure theory and advocating a filling-the-gap role for PSBs as "economic liberalism with a human face."[44]

As we shall see, however, market failure-based arguments have also been used by PSB organizations and their defenders. Rejecting the notion that market failures are *ipso facto* eradicated by new technologies, it is claimed that PSB is still needed to counter them. Peter Goodwin[45] traces the roots of market failure-based arguments in support of PSB in studies commissioned by the BBC to senior economists in the second half of the 1990s.[46] Jonathan Hardy argues that the concept of market failure is "critical to an understanding of broadcasting policy" in the United Kingdom in the first decade of the new millennium, for it allowed "a cultural and democratic case to be advanced using the [increasingly influential] discourse of economics."[47]

It is a testament to PSBs' institutional resilience that notwithstanding the major ideological, political, and technological challenges they have been facing, the vast majority of them still function to this day as

42. Donders and Van den Bulck, 145.
43. See, for example, Armstrong and Weeds.
44. Jakubowicz, 31.
45. Goodwin, "The Price of Everything," 48.
46. Notably, Graham and Davis.
47. Hardy, 530.

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publicly owned and publicly funded organizations, and often continue to hold a strong position within their national markets. While there has been no dismantling of PSB institutions (the policy prescription advocated by radical free-marketers), neoliberalism has nevertheless exerted a strong and pervasive influence on PSB policy, resulting in the encroachment of a competition discourse and in growing demands for PSB organizations to evidence their value for money. It is to this changing, and more challenging, ideological climate that PSB organizations have had to adjust and respond.

Situating the BBC's Charter Manifestos

Before analyzing the discursive strategies deployed by the BBC during Charter reviews, this section briefly situates its last three Charter manifestos in their respective historical context. *Extending Choice* came out in 1992, in the early phase of the marketization process of the UK broadcasting system.[48] The multichannel revolution had just begun. The new technologies of (still analogue) cable and satellite television had made available a dozen of new, more specialized channels, but their take-up was still low. As far as the BBC is concerned, in the second half of the 1980s, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had tried but failed to replace the license fee with adverting as BBC's main source of funding. This reform was part of a larger political project pursued by Thatcher (and only partly accomplished) to introduce a series of market-driven reforms to the wider UK broadcasting sector, in keeping with her commitment to a free market doctrine.[49] By the early 1990s, the Conservative government led by Thatcher's successor, John Major (1990–1997) "had opted for a "steady as she goes" course on the BBC."[50] According to Goodwin, the main reason for this was that the BBC itself "was already steering a course which conformed with Tory political objectives,"[51] such as pursuing efficiency-driven internal reforms and increasing commercial revenues.

By the time *Building Public Value* (2004) came out, digital television had made great inroads in the United Kingdom. Sky, a satellite-delivered pay-TV service, had established itself as a major force in the country's

48. See Potschka.
49. Tracey and Herzog, "Thatcher, Thatcherism and British Broadcasting Policy."
50. Goodwin, *Television Under the Tories*, 124.
51. Ibid.

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television market. Digitalization had led to an explosion in the number of television channels available to UK viewers, now in the hundreds. Intensified competition, and a decline in advertising spending, had increased financial pressures on commercial terrestrial broadcasters. Against this backdrop, the BBC, still the strongest player in the UK broadcasting sector, had come under sustained attack from its commercial rivals. They advocated a smaller BBC with a narrower remit claiming that a license fee-funded BBC was "crowding out" private-sector investment.[52] Tony Blair's New Labour was more supportive of the BBC than the Conservative administrations that had preceded it. However, its media policy reflected at the same time a broader process of repositioning toward neoliberalism.[53] This could be seen in the promotion of an economic-driven agenda in the cultural and media sectors, through the popularization of the notion of "creative industries."[54] In relation to the BBC, according to one critic, New Labour often appeared chiefly concerned with correcting "the distortion caused by the fact that the BBC is the creation of deliberate public intervention in the market."[55] Under New Labour (as under previous and successive Conservative administrations) the BBC was required to introduce efficiency measures, develop public–private partnerships and (somewhat in tension with concerns over its distorting impact on the market) increase revenue generated from commercial activities.

Finally, *British Bold Creative* (2015) came out at a particular challenging time for the BBC.[56] After the global financial crisis of 2008 and the return in office of the Conservative party in 2010, the license fee had been severely cut in real value terms, thus making it necessary for the BBC to implement further savings and pursue commercial revenues more aggressively. The BBC was also facing greater competition than ever, including from fast-growing global subscription video on demand services such as Netflix and Amazon. And yet, the "crowding out" argument of BBC's domestic competitors, both commercial broadcasters and newspaper publishers, continued to hold sway in policy circles. Within weeks of winning the general elections of May 2015, the new Conservative government had subject the BBC to a harsh license fee settlement for the five-year period from 2017/18, whose effect was estimated to be a 10 percent cut in BBC's

52. Barnett; and Freedman, *The Politics of Media Policy*.
53. Hardy; Hesmondhalgh et al.
54. See, for example, Garnham; Hesmondhalgh et al.
55. Freedman, *The Politics of Media Policy*, 158.
56. Freedman, "Media Policy Norms."

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budget. "Distinctiveness" was the keyword of the government's Green Paper published in July 2015, which set in motion the Charter review process.[57] The Green Paper raised questions about whether the BBC content was sufficiently distinctive from that of commercial providers and appeared to favor a smaller BBC operating according to a narrower remit. As will be discussed, *British Bold Creative* was the BBC's response to this political climate and competitive challenges. However, first, the next two sections, "Extending Choice: The BBC's Role in the New Broadcasting Age (1992)" and "Building Public Value: Renewing the BBC for a Digital World (2004)," deal in turn with *British Bold Creative*'s two forerunners.

Extending Choice: The BBC's Role in the New Broadcasting Age *(1992)*

Extending Choice (1992) outlines the vision of the BBC's role in a more competitive and commercially driven, but still analogue, marketplace. It paints a picture of radical change propelled by the twin processes of technological advances and deregulation: "almost everything about the broadcasting world has changed since the BBC's current Charter was issues in 1981."[58] It contrasts the "Old World" with a soon-to-materialize "New World" in which, with the take-up of cable and satellite services, there will be "more broadcasters, more television and radio channels, and more choices for viewers and listeners."[59] *Extending Choice*, however, crafts a story of decline, and in particular Stone's "change-is-only-an-illusion" variation.[60] In this new world of commercial television, for all its apparent attractions, there is a risk looming large, the report warns: a decline in the quality and range of programming. Improvement in terms of more choice for viewers, thus, could turn out to be an illusion only. To substantiate this claim, *Extending Choice* cites evidence from other countries experiencing the combined effects of new technologies and deregulation earlier than the United Kingdom, concluding that in many countries the effect of commercialization "has been a marked reduction in the overall quality of programing throughout the broadcasting system."[61] This is blamed on the "shaky" economics of "all but the most successful and powerful broadcasters,"[62]

57. Department of Culture Media and Sports (DCMS 2015); See also Goddard.
58. BBC, *Extending Choice*, 8.
59. Ibid., 15.
60. Stone, *Policy Paradox*.
61. BBC, *Extending Choice*, 54.
62. Ibid., 13.

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which creates overriding commercial pressures that militate against range and quality. As a publicly funded broadcaster, whose obligation is to serve the public rather than to generate a return to shareholders, the BBC has a critical role to play in countering the risk of "less real choice and reduced quality in broadcasting services,"[63] the outcome observed in countries that have allowed the balance between public and commercial broadcasting to shift too much in favor of the latter. *Extending Choice* makes frequent references to the high quality and range of BBC's programs, either as a pledge for the future or as an (unsubstantiated) evaluation of BBC's current output.

In Chapter 2, *Extending Choice* spells out the BBC's public purpose in a commercializing broadcasting system. This chapter is structured around the familiar Reithian triad of information ("Informing the national debate"), entertainment ("Expressing British culture and entertainment"), and education ("Creating opportunities for education"). In each of these areas the BBC positions itself as playing a critical role in countering the limitations of a purely commercial market, complementing commercial provision. Facing strong financial pressures, commercial broadcasters are likely to disregard the public interest, the report warns, and tailor news coverage "to the need to make a profit,"[64] produce "easily digestible entertainment within well-established formats,"[65] and limit the supply of educational services "because they lack broad popular and commercial appeal."[66] *Extending Choice* then rehearses some of the core tenets of PSB, such as ensuring universal access, providing a comprehensive service, taking risks with innovative programming, and giving "special prominence to artistic, sporting and ceremonial events that bring the nation together"[67] while at the same time portraying "a multiracial, multicultural society" and responding "to the diversity of cultures throughout the UK."[68]

The final section of Chapter 2 extends the Reithian triad to encompass "Communicating between the United Kingdom and abroad." Apart from a passing reference to the need for the BBC "to reflect foreign cultures and perspectives in its services to the British audience,"[69] this communication

63. Ibid., 19.
64. Ibid., 20.
65. Ibid., 21.
66. Ibid., 22.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 23.

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is primarily understood as flowing from the BBC to overseas audiences in order "to promote understanding of British culture and values" and "bring credit to the United Kingdom around the world" (a language that foreshadows contemporary discourse on "soft power"[70]). Here *Extending Choice* also deploys for the first time an industrial policy argument to justify the BBC's role, claiming that the BBC's international activities also serve the national interest "by underpinning a substantial export industry."[71] It cites figures on BBC's growing international programs sales and argues that "as a natural outlet for British talent and skills" the BBC should be a "major force" in the expanding international television market.[72] As it shall be seen in the next two sections, arguments about the BBC's economic contribution will figure much more prominently in BBC's later Charter manifestos.

In short, *Extending Choice* builds a case for the BBC by crafting a story of decline in the quality of programming in countries that have gone down the route of deregulation and commercialization. This story is meant to warn UK policy makers against this outcome and enables them to portray the BBC (a publicly funded broadcaster operating according to objectives that are inherently different from those of commercial broadcasters and thus capable of guaranteeing the highest quality of output), as the "fixer" of the problem. The manifesto turns upside down the free-marketers' argument that commercial television heralds a new era of consumer choice by claiming already in its title that "extending choice" (implying *real* choice) will be the BBC's main role in a "new broadcasting age" characterized by the coexistence of PSB and commercial services. In *Extending Choice*, the BBC's public purpose is still largely articulated in conventional terms and framed around the Reithian triad of informing, entertaining, and educating. Arguments about the economic role of the BBC surface but only feature in a subordinate place.

Building Public Value: Renewing the BBC for a Digital World *(2004)*

Published 12 years after *Extending Choice, Building Public Value* (2004) similarly paints a picture of a media landscape being dramatically transformed in the preceding decade: "Digital television, the internet and mobile

70. See Nye.
71. BBC, *Extending Choice*, 23.
72. Ibid., 38.

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telephony were hardly mentioned in 1995, yet all three have become part of everyday life for more than half the population of the UK."[73] In characterizing the present historic moment as one at which the United Kingdom is entering "the second phase of the digital revolution,"[74] it predicts further dramatic change over the course of the next decade.

The second phase of the digital revolution holds great promises for participatory communication, but it also presents major challenges. In describing the latter, *Building Public Value* casts the net more widely than *Extending Choice*. The "explosion in media choice" is "fragmenting audiences,"[75] a process that could have some troubling consequences if not carefully managed. Not only (as already warned *in Extending Choice*) is "range and quality at risk,"[76] as growing competition means that the same revenues are spread over a growing number of services, "putting a strain on quality and range in both television and radio."[77] *Building Public Value* identifies other risks such as "growing digital divides"[78] and "diminishing shared experiences."[79] It also contends that, contrary to common expectations, industry concentration is likely to grow in the digital age, "creating risks for the plurality of voices and range of British-made content in UK broadcasting."[80] After identifying the key challenges of the digital world, *Building Public Value*, similarly to *Extending Choice*, seeks to demonstrate that the BBC is essential for countering those risks while contributing to bring the benefits of the digital world to fruition to all.

The central case is put forward in Chapter 2 where public value, the keyword in BBC's 2004 manifesto, is defined. Loosely adapted from public sector management theory, and very much in tune with government thinking at that time, this notion is deployed by the BBC in order to legitimize its own institutional status as well as a guide to its future conduct.[81] The public value generated by the BBC is contrasted with the shareholder value created by commercial broadcasters. Public value is defined as the sum of individual, citizen ("value to society as a whole") and net economic

73. BBC, *Building Public Value*, 48.
74. Ibid., 48.
75. Ibid., 53.
76. Ibid., 55.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 53.
79. Ibid., 54.
80. Ibid., 56.
81. Collins, 164–65.

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value. The first two components of public value are further differentiated into democratic, cultural, educational, social and community, and global value. This is essentially another twist on Reithian's triad. The BBC's role in serving the world ("global value") and the nations, regions, and local communities of the United Kingdom ("social and community value") are added to Reith's triad of informing (under the heading "democratic value"), entertaining (dignified here as "cultural value"), and educating ("educational value"). Like *Extending Choice*, in articulating the notion of individual and citizen value, *Building Public Value* essentially rehearses the traditional case for PSB. However, *Building Public Value* (differently from its predecessor) does so by deploying extensively the language of economics. In a section titled "The limitations of the commercial marketplace" the report draws explicitly on market failure theory engaging with such notions as externalities and public good in order to build a case for the BBC's contribution to the "wider well-being of society."

There is, however, a further element that sets *Building Public Value* apart from *Extending Choice* even more clearly. By conceptualizing "net economic value" as a third component of public value, *Building Public Value* brings industrial policy arguments in support of the BBC (only surfacing in *Extending Choice*) to the fore. The economic case for the BBC is rehearsed at length, in a dedicated section ("The BBC's economic value") and at various other points. It is also noticeable that the discussion is now framed in the language of the creative economy. As already mentioned, the notion of creative industries was popularized by the New Labour administrations in the same years. *Building Public Value* states that "through its creative investment, its stability of funding through fluctuating economic cycles and its risk-taking [the BBC] makes a substantial and measurable contribution to the supply side on which the UK's creative and cultural life depends."[82] There are several ways in which the BBC creates economic value: (1) by investing in the United Kingdom's creative economy—and indirectly by "stimulating greater investment in the UK's creative economy by other broadcasters, who spend more on programmes than they otherwise would"[83]; (2) by investing in skills and training; and (3) by pioneering new technologies and opening up new markets (the contemporaneous example showcased by the BBC is its role in leading "the nation on

82. BBC, *Building Public Value*, 40.

83. Ibid., 40.

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a journey towards a fully digital Britain"[84] through its investment in the digital terrestrial platform Freeview after the failure to promote this new technology through private-sector investment).

The "crowding out" argument of BBC's commercial rivals (see contextual section) bears a clear trace in *Building Public Value*. The qualifier "net" is added to the notion of economic value. *Building Public Value* concedes that the BBC's market impact can have "a negative element in cases where it reduces demand for commercial products,"[85] and recognizes that in future the BBC "needs to be increasingly sensitive to the impact of its activities on commercial companies."[86] However, it ultimately rejects the argument of BBC's commercial rivals by arguing that the United Kingdom's strong performance in the creative economy relative to the country's size is the clearest evidence that "the BBC makes a strongly positive *net* contribution to the commercial health of the UK media sector."[87]

Although in *Extending Choice* there was little in the way of substantiating claims about the high quality and distinctiveness of BBC's output, *Building Public Value* puts forward an "evidence-based approach to measuring performance" (and thus the creation of public value). Quality is one of the four performance criteria, alongside reach, impact, and value for money, and is to be measured through a number of mostly quantitative indicators.[88]

Finally, in *Building Public Value* the strategic importance of partnerships is given greater emphasis than in *Extending Choice*. The manifesto claims that through partnering with a range of cultural organizations and other public- and private-sector bodies such as health and sports organizations, the BBC "can have a 'multiplier' impact on society," thereby generating public value *indirectly*.[89] As will be discussed in the next section, "British Bold Creative: The BBC's Programs and Services in the Next Charter (2015)," this theme will feature even more prominently, and with a somewhat different emphasis, in BBC's 2015 Charter manifesto.

To sum up, *Building Public Value* tells a story of technology-driven change and warns that while holding great promises for a better future, the digital world of the coming decade could be bedeviled by a number

84. Ibid., 60.
85. Ibid., 29.
86. Ibid., 41.
87. Ibid. (emphasis added).
88. Ibid., 87.
89. Ibid., 29.

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of problems that a renewed BBC is uniquely positioned to offer a remedy to. Traditional arguments for PSB still feature prominently. However, it is noticeable that these arguments are now also advanced through the language of market failure theory. Still more significantly, by conceptualizing "net economic value" as a third component of BBC's "public value," *Building Public Value* brings for the first time arguments about the BBC's role in sustaining the growth of the UK creative economy to the fore.

British Bold Creative: The BBC's Programmes and Services in the Next Charter *(2015)*

Like its two forerunners, *British Bold Creative* (2015) too highlights a number of problems that the Internet is exacerbating (e.g., social polarization, unreliability of online information) and which the BBC can offer a remedy to. It also tells a straightforward story of decline around which it builds the main case for BBC's role. Citing figures from the UK communications regulator Ofcom, it shows a decline in the amount of money channeled into British programming in the five-year period between 2008 and 2013,[90] a decline largely attributable to reduced investments from a financially strained BBC. The manifesto highlights how the BBC's license fee accounts for around 20 percent of TV industry revenues but contributes to around 40 percent of total investment in original British programs, and claims that neither multichannel operators like Sky nor international video-on-demand platforms like Netflix and Amazon are likely "to make up this deficiency."[91] In asking who then in future "will invest in high-quality British programming for radio, television, and online," *British Bold Creative* argues that the 2008–2013 period provides "a real-life test [. . .] of what happens with a smaller BBC."[92] A well-funded BBC is thus essential for securing a healthy level of investment in British-made content. *British Bold Creative* is peppered with qualifiers indicating the national origin of BBC's programming. For instance, in encapsulating BBC's future mission the director general's introduction to the manifesto argues that the BBC's role in the next decade "is to enable content of the highest quality, *made in Britain*, for audiences to enjoy."[93]

90. BBC, *British Bold Creative*, 47–49.
91. Ibid., 47.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., 5 (emphasis added).

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By delivering "great *British* programmes,"[94] the BBC is not only meeting audience expectations but also contributing to "the health of Britain's vibrant creative economy."[95] The manifesto claims that "investment in the BBC is investment in Britain's creative industries"[96] and that "less BBC spend means a smaller creative industry."[97] In *British Bold Creative*, claims about BBC's economic contribution take an even more central place than in *Building Public Value* ten years earlier. If *Building Public Value* had felt it proper to clarify that contribution to the economic health of the United Kingdom should rightly not be seen as the BBC's primary goal, which is "to serve people as individuals and as citizens,"[98] *British Bold Creative* places the creative industries discourse central stage from the outset. The director general's preface to the document frames the key issue at stake in the renewal of the BBC Royal Charter as one of making the right choices so that "Britain can have a BBC that excels globally—a BBC that is a powerhouse for creative and *economic* growth for the whole of the United Kingdom."[99] *British Bold Creative* takes pain to counter the still influential "crowding out" argument of BBC's commercial rivals,[100] reassuring that "even if we do more, we will become a smaller part of the market."[101] It resorts to the same argumentative logic deployed in *Building Public Value* to argue that the BBC has a strong positive economic impact ("The UK has the BBC, and few other countries are in better creative shape than the UK"[102]) and lists "the principal channels through which the BBC supports private sector growth."[103] These include direct investment of license fee income in the creative sector, notably in a thriving independent production sector, and a virtuous circle whereby the BBC incentivize commercial broadcasters to "raise their game to compete for audiences, which challenges the BBC to aim higher."[104] It cites a study by PricewaterhouseCoopers modelling the impact on the creative sector of license fee investment, concluding

94. Ibid., 6 (emphasis added).
95. Ibid., 7.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid., 98.
98. BBC, *Building Public Value*, 40.
99. BBC, *British Bold Creative*, 4 (emphasis added).
100. Ibid., 13–14, 50–55.
101. Ibid., 55.
102. Ibid., 22.
103. Ibid.
104. Ibid.

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that "for every £1 increase in licence fee revenue, the BBC would generate about 60p of extra economic value."[105]

A whole chapter of *British Bold Creative* (Chapter 2: "Is the BBC distinctive and of high quality?") addresses the question of BBC's distinctiveness raised by the government in its Green Paper (see contextual section), seeking to demonstrate that "overall, the BBC's services are more distinctive than they have ever been."[106] It argues that distinctiveness should be assessed in relation to BBC *services* (e.g., its television channels), rather than at the level of *individual programs*. The latter "should be judged on their own merit,"[107] not by comparison. For a BBC's *service* to pass the test of distinctiveness, "overall, the range of programmes [. . .] should be clearly distinguishable from its commercial competitors."[108] A noticeable point of difference with *Building Public Value* is that right from the outset *British Bold Creative* dismisses the usefulness of market failure theory to support the case for the BBC. The Director-General's preface states that "the case for the BBC doesn't rest on ideological arguments, nor on *debates between economists*. It rests on what we do."[109] The rejection of market failure language is indicative of a change in how the BBC, in the context of its partnership agenda with private-sector players wishes to be primarily seen in relation to the market—in *synergistic* rather than oppositional terms, that is, as a market-driving rather than market-correcting tool.

In articulating BBC's public mission, Part Two of *British Bold Creative* plays another twist on the Reithian triad. To the traditional mission of informing, entertaining, and educating it adds "a silent, fourth imperative—to enable,"[110] and goes on pledging that in future the BBC will "be Britain's creative partner" and "a platform for this country's incredible talent." As discussed earlier, the value created by the BBC through its partnerships was a theme already featuring in *Building Public Value*. In *British Bold Creative* this theme is more prominent ("An Open BBC" is the title of a dedicated chapter) and greater emphasis is now placed on BBC's partnerships with its competitors and the wider industry, as well as with other cultural and public-sector institutions. *British Bold Creative* pledges that

105. Ibid., 98.
106. Ibid., 25.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., 24.
109. Ibid., 5 (emphasis added).
110. Ibid., 6.

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"everyone from our licence fee payers to our competitors" will see the BBC "as a partner to help them achieve their goals."[111] Showing a commitment to work with the "widest range of partners,"[112] the BBC assures that it will work "better with our competitors" too, including struggling local newspapers (who will be invited to provide BBC local services) and commercial broadcasters and television production companies (who will have the opportunity to make their shows available through the iPlayer, the BBC's online video platform).

Summing up, as well as providing a defense of BBC's distinctiveness in response to the objections raised by the government, *British Bold Creative* articulates BBC's main public purpose by connecting three themes already featuring, albeit less prominently, in earlier BBC manifestos. As clear from its title, in justifying its raison d'etre, *British Bold Creative* plays heavily on the Britishness of BBC services. A key marker of difference with the commercial sector lies in BBC's uniquely strong commitment to British-made programs. Across radio, television, and music, the BBC's mission is presented as showcasing the best of British content. A second theme that features in *British Bold Creative* more prominently than in either *Extending Choice* or *Building Public Value* is also signaled in its title, namely, the idea that a key contribution made by the BBC is by driving the growth of the wider UK *creative* economy. Third and finally, a central claim made in *British Bold Creative*, developing a theme already present in *Building Public Value*, is the wider benefits deriving from BBC engaging in partnerships with a wide range of organizations, including industry competitors and suppliers. Indeed, the 2015 manifesto's big pledge is to transform the BBC into "an open BBC" that is driven in everything it does by the imperative to enable as well as to inform, entertain, and educate. These three themes are woven together to form a coherent story that overall serves the main purpose of highlighting the *economic* contribution that the BBC makes to the whole of the British creative sector as well as its democratic and cultural role. The emphasis placed on industry partnerships is also functional to BBC's alliance-building efforts with private stakeholders (notably, TV production companies and local newspapers) who are shown to stand to benefit from a well-resourced BBC.

111. Ibid., 59.
112. Ibid.

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Discussion

Four main themes can be extracted from the close reading of the three manifestos presented in the preceding sections. Table 1 summarizes the way in which they feature in each manifesto.

As expected, in making a case for its continuing relevance, the BBC has acknowledged the magnitude of technological change but has rejected a technologically optimistic view that multichannel and digital television, the Internet, and social media have unqualified positive effects. In a similar fashion, the three manifestos craft a story that conforms in its broad outline to Deborah Stone's "change-is-only-an-illusion" storyline, a variation

TABLE 1 Thematic Analysis of BBC's Charter Manifestos

Theme	*Extending Choice* (1992)	*Building Public Value* (2004)	*British Bold Creative* (2015)
Narrative on the effects of new technologies	Multichannel television → deregulation and unchecked commercialization → decline in quality and range → BBC needed to uphold standards	"Second phase" of the digital revolution → great promises → but also great risks → a renewed BBC contributing to the former and offering a remedy to the latter	Internet age → strengthens the case for the BBC → as a trusted source; to promote social cohesion; to support high-quality British output (in the face of falling investment)
Arguments in support of the BBC	Traditional defense based on normative arguments around political and cultural citizenship	*"Net economic value": industrial policy arguments gaining prominence. *Market failure theory deployed to justify an expansive role for the BBC	*Prominence of industrial policy arguments (BBC "a powerhouse for creative and economic growth"). *Rejection of economic language
Quality and distinctiveness	Quality asserted and/or pledged but not evidenced	Adoption of a quality performance measurement framework	National origin of BBC's programing as a key marker of distinctiveness
BBC's relationship with the wider industry	Opposition between commercial and public service goals; complementarity with commercial broadcasters	Partnerships with external producers and with other public bodies and cultural organizations	"An Open BBC"; emphasis on partnerships with BBC's competitors

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of the more general story of decline. Having painted a picture of a media landscape dramatically transformed (and potentially vastly improved) by new communications technologies, each manifesto then warns against emergent problems (whether it be a decline in the quality and range of programming because of unchecked commercialization, as in *Extending Choice*, or a fall in the level of investment in British-made programs, as in *British Bold Creative*). These problems, it is claimed in the manifestos, could get worse in future unless political decisions are taken to secure the position and funding of the BBC (thus portrayed as the fixer of the problem).

The main shift in emphasis in BBC's discursive strategy, it was argued, is the growing preeminence of economic arguments about the role of the BBC in stimulating the growth of the UK creative sector. Such arguments first gained visibility in *Building Public Value* (2004) where "net economic value" is identified as a third component of BBC's public value. A decade later, in *British Bold Creative* (2015), they take central stage.[113] In a bid to demonstrate that the industry stands to benefit from a thriving BBC, *British Bold Creative* (2015) develops a narrative linking claims about the BBC's role in sustaining the UK creative sector with two other prominent themes identified by the analysis, namely: (1) the "Britishness" of BBC's output as a key marker of quality and distinctiveness (and thus the role that a well-resourced BBC can play to counter the worrying decline in the level of investment in British-made programs in recent years) and (2) the pledge for an "open BBC" engaging with the widest possible range of partners, now also including BBC's historic competitors. As in the two other manifestos, in *British Bold Creative* two conventional arguments in support of the BBC are framed around the age-old Reithian triad of informing, educating, and entertaining—adapted here to include the new mission of "enabling" through partnerships. Overall, however, the narrative developed in *British Bold Creative* is instrumental in highlighting BBC's contribution to the growth of the UK creative economy as much as its civic and cultural role.

In order to support (while at the same time informing) the account presented up to this point of BBC's discursive strategies, a quantitative lexical analysis was performed counting the frequencies of keywords in each of the three manifestos. The results are shown in Table 2.

Noticeable terminological shifts can be observed over time. They are in keeping with the expectations set by the thematic analysis presented earlier.

113. See also D'Arma.

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TABLE 2 Frequency (per 100,000 Words) of Keywords in BBC's Charter Manifestos

	Extending Choice (1992)	*Building Public Value* (2004)	*British Bold Creative* (2015)
Pubic purpose	120	23	0
Commercial	460	289	152
Complement(ary)	52	11	18
Quality	366	143	164
Value	34	499	82
Market failure	0	17	3
Public good	0	36	0
Partner(ship)	52	201	173
Distinction/ distinct(ive/ness)	108	36	187
Creative industry/ industries/sector/ economy	0	23	76
Open	47	98	132
Nation(al)/British/ Britain/United Kingdom	585	1,141	1,329

Notes: Given that in 2015 a separate report was published by the BBC to address issues of governance and accountability, in order to ensure the comparability of the three texts, the sections of the BBC's 1992 and 2004 manifestos dealing with these issues (Chapter 8 and Part II, respectively) were excluded from the word count; Cells with the highest number of occurrences for each keyword are shaded in grey.

Keywords more likely to appear in *Extending Choice* than in the two later manifestos include "public purpose" (the most common way of referring in 1992 to BBC's mission or to its societal contribution), "commercial" (an adjective often qualifying nouns such as channel or program and used to contrast the output of private channels with that of the BBC), "complement(ary)" (as a verb or an adjective to refer to BBC's role in relation to the expanding commercial sector), and "quality" (often as "high-quality" in relation to BBC's services and programs). In *Building Public Value*, unsurprisingly, "value" (half of the times occurring as "public value") has a high frequency relative to the occurrence of the word in the two other manifestos. The deployment of economic language in *Building Public Value* can be seen in occurrences such as "market failure" and "public good" (practically absent from the two other manifestos). "Partner(ship)" is four times as common in *Building Public Value* than in *Extending Choice* (reflecting BBC's new emphasis on collaborations in the early 2000s). It occurs nearly as frequently ten

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years later in *British Bold and Creative*. Keywords appearing more frequently in the latter than in either *Building Public Value* or *Extending Choice* include: "distinction/distinct(ive/ness)" (which by 2015 had become a key regulatory concept in UK PSB policy); "creative industry/industries/sector/economy" (reflecting the increasing centrality of economic arguments in support of the BBC); "open" (in the context of BBC's partnership agenda), and "nation(al)/British/Britain/United Kingdom" (often with reference to the domestic origin of BBC's programs in order to mark BBC's distinctiveness).

Conclusion

Informed by ideational approaches to the study of policy making, the analysis presented in this article has sought to identify the main shifts in BBC's discursive articulations of its societal benefits and in the narratives deployed to justify its continuing raison d'être during a period of time (1992–2015) characterized by profound changes in both technological and market conditions and in the political discursive context. It has been argued that as a strategic actor operating within a "densely structured context"[114] and seeking to secure its future on favorable terms, in its Charter manifestos the BBC has extensively deployed influential discourses within UK broadcasting policy. In particular, the analysis has shown that since the early 2000s, the BBC has leveraged discourses around the role of the creative industries as a driver of economic growth to counter claims made by its commercial rivals that a license-fee-funded BBC inhibits private-sector growth. By doing so, the BBC has endorsed a dominant neoliberal discourse that foregrounds the industrial/economic dimension of the media sector. However, at the same time, the BBC has challenged some of the prescriptive implications of such discourse (the scaling down of the BBC to minimize the "crowding out" of private-sector investment) by purporting to demonstrate instead the *positive* knock-on economic effects of a thriving publicly funded BBC. This strategy might have been effective in securing the last two Charter renewals on favorable terms (given the political and economic circumstances of the time). However, it could also be argued that it has ultimately contributed to validate an economistic discourse around PSB and a reductive view of the license fee as an industrial policy tool. Given the role that the BBC has traditionally played in

114. Hay, *Political Analysis*, 213.

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shaping how other PSBs have articulated their vision and strategy, it seems likely that the key shifts identified here in BBC's discursive strategy have wider resonance.

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