

Can the BBC survive the digital age?

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Neo: A Journal of Student Research

March 2010

Abstract

The BBC is a public service broadcaster that is highly regarded by the British television audience. However, it is subject to increasing threats to its continuing viability from digital private sector television providers. A part of the threat to the BBC is the way in which it is funded through the TV licence. This article examines the threats to the survival of the BBC through a review of relevant literature and with reference to a survey conducted by the author. The research confirms the high regard in which the BBC is held by the British public and argues for its continuing existence.

The BBC has been an extremely successful broadcasting company. However in the approach to the Digital Switchover it faces increasing uncertainty because of competition with new digital commercial channels which hold niche audiences. The future of broadcast television such as the BBC is uncertain, and there are many reasons why it may not survive; 'the predictions of the death of broadcast television are every bit as loud now as were those of the end of cinema in the face of competition from television' (Ellis, 2002, p.175).

The BBC sees its purpose to support British interests in the world and has a reputation for its impartiality. The BBC is committed to the concept of public broadcasting, providing a platform for local and national debate. It has three main aims; to inform, educate and entertain. In 2001 and 2002 the BBC started operating four free to air digital television channels: 'BBC 3, a mixed genre, entertainment-led youth channel; BBC 4, a channel for culture, science, the arts and ideas; and two children's channels' (Brown, 2004, p.486). These channels differed from other digital TV channels because they are connected to the people of Britain as a collective group rather than being tailored to a specific audience (Brown, 2004).

In order to take on the opposition of other digital commercial channels BBC has devised several strategies to keep its audience. In 2005 job cuts were announced to release money to fund more quality programming (BBC News Channel, 2005, p.1). As a result of these job cuts the BBC now relies more on freelance film makers and private sector providers for its programming. However, this can be regarded as a positive move because it brings out a more vibrant diversity in programming; 'the BBC are now legally obliged to commission at least 25 per cent of programming from independent production companies' (Shepherd, 1997, p7.) In bringing private talent and programming onto the BBC's channels it is creating a more experimental range of programmes that have new ideas and can push boundaries.

To compete against the new DTV channels the BBC also needed to adapt to the new multichannel era of television. In 2002 the BBC launched Freeview in partnership with BSkyB and Crown Castle. The BBC promoted Freeview during its own programming schedule as an easy one off payment which gave viewers access to thirty channels with no extra charge. With the promotion of free digital channels, the BBC had created BSkyB's biggest rival. Freeview was a chance for people to dip into digital television without committing to a subscription: 'Within a year of its launch, it became BSkyB's main competitor, pushing the take-up of DTV to over 50 per cent of households.' (Wells cited in Brown, 2004, p.487). The BBC also promoted the BBC HD channel with clever and impressive advertising with the title "TV goes cinematic", which was to be available on Sky, Virgin Media and FreeSat. The advert for the new channel included a fictional dramatic scene based on the BBC's own 'Antiques RoadShow', where the actions were made cinematic with special effects.

In 2003, all the BBC channels were offered free-to-air with an alternative satellite facility: 'the BBC withdrew from BSkyB's satellite encryption service, saving £85 million' (Brown, 2004, p.487), giving the BBC a further advantage.

Despite the opposition of commercial digital channels, research has shown that the 'BBC 1 still reaches 86 per cent of the population, the highest reach of any of the big channels' (Byrne, 2004). It is argued that no channels, other than public broadcasting, can offer such good quality programming that brings people together. The commercial digital channels are well suited for individuals, but are unable to provide a sense of a national TV audience engaging in a shared experience. The BBC has always achieved top ratings on Christmas day with quality programming bringing families together. On December 25th 2008 'the BBC secured an emphatic ratings victory with nine of the top 10 shows' (BBC website, 2008, p.1), the highest TV ratings for Christmas day were Wallace and Gromit's latest animation, which 'attracted a peak audience of 14.4million – ahead of the concluding episode of an Eastenders double bill which attracted 12.6million viewers' (BBCwebsite, 2008, p.1). In

making the BBC channels for a range of viewers the BBC 'can ensure that no one is excluded' (BBC, 2004, p.5), the BBC believes that 'the potential and need for public value broadcasting has never been greater' (BBC, 2004, p.5). The BBC channels can be seen as an escape from advertising and the world of consumption: 'public broadcast television connects with the private and the disconnected moments of individuals, with diffuse feelings of escape and distraction from the adventures of modern consumerism and life in the company of other consumers' (Ellis, 2002, p.176). It enables audiences to watch quality programming without the compulsion to consume. No advertising means no interruption between programmes, which is very compatible for recording.

More choice in digital channels does not necessarily mean more diversity and better programming. Many digital channels show programmes that are cheaply imported from America: 'many of the cable options simply air either reruns of broadcast programmes or provide a certain type of previously existing programming, for example, sports, music videos, etc, twenty four hours a day. More content does not necessarily mean *different* content.' (Crouteau 2001, p.81).

It is a widely held view by many supporters of the BBC that it will survive the digital age simply because commercial broadcasters will find it increasingly difficult to afford to keep up with quality programming for such niche audiences: 'In new media and in old, ...[the] contention was that the BBC's role will be more important in the digital era, because commercial media face increasing market fragmentation and audience segmentation; as a result they will be less able to afford to support even their former services' (Brown, 2004, p. 487).

The BBC should also be credited for its achievements on the Internet. The BBC's website is one of the most popular in the world, with many people using it as a means of being updated quickly on news, current affairs and the weather, receiving '17.2 million unique users each week in the UK and 33.2 million internationally' (Kiss, 2008, p.1). The BBC website has specialised services for all ages, including BBC Bite Size which is often used in schools to help with exam revision.

Another tactic of the BBC is to spread its production and broadcasting outside of London and into other cities in the UK: 'the digital world demands a more open, responsive BBC. A BBC which reflects the whole of the UK in its output' (BBC, 2004, p.6).

There are reasons to believe that the BBC will not survive the digital age, with evidence to show that audiences are turning to a more complex multi channel environment, with so much choice that viewers would rather watch a channel that matches their individual needs, interests and personality. The result is that in 2004 for the first time, 'multi-channel television has attracted higher overall viewing figures than either BBC1 or ITV1' (Byrne, 2004, p.1). TV viewings show that BBC 1 and BBC 2 have had major reductions in its audience numbers: 'the combined audience share for BBC1 and BBC2 has fallen by almost 9 per cent since 2000' (Byrne, 2004, p.1). However the current Director General of the BBC argues that: 'making high quality programming is more important than chasing viewer ratings' (Thompson cited in Byrne, 2004, p.1).

Looking at the fall in the BBC viewings it is an unknown as to how long the public are going to tolerate a compulsory 'television tax' especially when a large portion of the country are having to pay for satellite or cable subscriptions as well. It could be argued that if not enough people are watching BBC channels then the licence fee money is being wasted and could be spent on something more beneficial: 'those tax dollars could be going for public services like education (the BBC's budget is fully half the amount spent each year by Britain's Department of Education) that are infinitely more important to the public weal' (Heilemannn, 2008 p.1).

Many people are starting to avoid the TV licence fee and some might argue that the BBC only has to blame itself. The iPlayer service is a new medium that the BBC has created in order to modernise its broadcasting service, allowing people to watch programmes after they had been aired for free. In November 2008 The Sunday Times newspaper reported that a couple in Surrey were fed up with paying £139.50 for their licence fee and gave their television away, choosing instead to watch all their favourite TV shows on iPlayer on their

laptop: 'we will see more people realising they can watch TV online without a licence. Funding for the BBC will decline' (Foster cited in Swinford, 2008, p.1). Research shows that since the iPlayer service was set up 'more than 220million requests have been made for programmes online' (Swinford, 2008, p.1).

The issue of the licence fee continues to be a major issue for the BBC. If viewer ratings are not maintained there will have to be a decision made as to whether public funding for the BBC should continue. At the moment the BBC's future is said to look bleak as the governments long awaited proposals on the future of the BBC will reportedly contain the conclusion that licence fee funding for all its programmes will not survive into the age of digital-only television. It seems that the public will be less accepting of the licence fee and, with the advances of digital television, people will become increasingly resistant to paying a compulsory charge for a few channels that they don't watch or don't watch very often. The result might be that 'as public support for the licence fee fades, so public respect and affection for the BBC may also decline' (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2008, paragraph 33).

However there is a solution, it is possible that the BBC could share the licence fee with another broadcasting company such as Channel 4 or ITV who are also struggling to produce good viewing figures independently. However, some question whether Channel 4 and ITV should receive public funding as well as advertising revenue.

Many argue that that BBC should have the licence fee provision withdrawn and become a commercial broadcaster like its competitors. Former Liberal Democrat councillor, Jonathan Calder, posed the question; 'How can you justify financing the BBC through the licence fee in a multi-channel, multi-platform, multi-everything world?' (Calder cited in Stephen, 2008). Calder then said; 'Increasing numbers of people rarely watch its programmes and the fee is the nearest thing we have to a poll tax. If the BBC has its way, it will cost us all £180 a year by 2013' (Calder cited in Stephen, 2008). Calder suggests that there are other 'fairer' options for the BBC as it enters the digital age; 'scrap the licence fee

but fund it through general taxation', or 'scrap the licence fee and make the BBC members pay for a subscription service', or 'scrap the licence fee and let the BBC compete for advertising revenue' (Calder cited in Stephen, 2008). It has perhaps unfair that the BBC has licence fee funding and monopolises the industry with this advantage whereas other broadcasters have to compete in the private sector. However the BBC would fail to be universal and in the public interest if it were to become commercially funded, and to many it is 'essential that the general public have access to high broadcasting services' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008, paragraph 6) in the same way that they should have access to public libraries, museums and galleries paid for out of public funding. It is still the case that 'people feel strongly about the BBC, its services and the future, in part at least because they see themselves as stakeholders in the Corporation.' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008, paragraph 13).

In times of crisis, tragedy or national (or international) importance, the BBC News seems to come across as more publically trusted than any other broadcasted news programme. This trust in the BBC was confirmed during the invasion of Iraq when, according to an ICM poll: '93% of the UK population followed the first two weeks of the invasion on the BBC' (Doherty, 2005, p1). On September 11th 2001, '33 million people tuned into the BBC television news - 52% of the British population' (Whittle, 2004, p.4), proving that although the BBC is mocked for its lack of entertainment by its broadcasting competitors, it achieves praise for its high quality news programming during national and international importance.

The BBC provides an impartial service, and is celebrated for showing different views and opinions from different voices of the nation; 'all of our audiences turn to the BBC not just for accurate news and information, but also to be helped to make sense of events through impartial analysis and being offered a range of views and opinions, including the voices of opposition' (Whittle, 2004, p.7).

Broadcast television has developed 'a vital social role' (Ellis, 2002, p. 176). However in order for the BBC to survive it needs to find further solutions and not rely so heavily on the licensing fee. The digital commercial broadcasting channels are seen as desirable to a large segment of the potential audience and are definitely a threat to the BBC's viewing numbers. On the other hand, the BBC may survive due to the multi-channel television resulting in fragmentation of traditional mass audiences which will 'reduce the production budgets for the commercial public service broadcasters and undermine the viability of current trade-off public service outputs in return for other privileges' (Department of Culture Media and Sport, 2008, ANNEX A, paragraph a).

In order to access how the public view the BBC I created my own questionnaire and asked twenty five people, between the ages of eighteen to fifty six, thirteen men and twelve women, four key questions. The questions were:

1. If given the choice, would you prefer to watch the terrestrial channels (e.g. BBC1, BBC2, ITV, or Channel 4) or a digital, cable, satellite channel?
2. Do you think the licence fee is fair?
3. Do you think the BBC will survive the digital switchover?
4. Do you feel it is important that the BBC carries on throughout the digital age?

Results showed that 56% of those questioned would rather watch terrestrial channels such as BBC1, BBC2, Channel 4 or ITV over digital, satellite or cable channels. The most popular reason for this preference was the fact that the programmes had higher production values and were considered "high quality" and "better programmes". Also many people preferred the way programmes did not have any interruption from advertising. However there was still a substantial portion of people who preferred digital, satellite or cable television. The most popular reason for preference for this was because there was "more variety and choice".

However this does not necessarily mean that the 56% who prefer digital, cable or satellite ignore the BBC Channels. For further investigation I then asked the twenty five people to name two of their favourite television channels that they watched the most. Even from a poll of just twenty five people a vast variety of channels were chosen as the top two favourites, emphasising the amount of choice. Only two of the BBC channels came up in the results; 8% of people chose BBC 1 as their favourite channel, 6% chose BBC 3 as one of their choices, BBC 2 and BBC 4 were not mentioned as a favourite by any of the candidates. Dave; a channel owned by UKTV, got the same amount of votes from the viewers as BBC 1 (see figure 2), however Dave broadcasts programmes that were originally or still are broadcast by the BBC such as; 'Red Dwarf', 'QI', 'Dragons Den', 'Mock the Week', 'Top Gear' and many more (Dave UKTV, 2009, p1, 6, 7).

I then asked about the other services provided by the BBC. The most popular answer to this was the recognition of internet services such as BBC iPlayer and the radio stations. However only one person managed to name a BBC scheme: "Blast", an organisation to encourage young people aged between thirteen and nineteen to explore art, dance, film, music, writing and games. No one was able to state any BBC charities or events held by the BBC each year. When asked 'do you think the licence fee is fair?', 60% of people thought it was, but 40% of people disagreed. Many thought the licence fee was a nuisance, complaining about the way threatening letters were sent every few months even if you did not have a television. I found that 52% of people I asked did not think the BBC would survive the upcoming digital era, but a very high proportion of the replies, 84%, felt it important that the BBC survive regardless of whether they watched BBC programmes or not. One reason given for this was, 'I feel it is what makes this country', another said 'if the BBC was to disappear, the British media would take a devastating hit'.

In conclusion, there is evidence to suggest that the BBC is worth saving because of its commitment to the values of public broadcasting, its ability to serve a mixed genre audience and for a diversity of quality programming. The BBC provides an essential escape from the consumer world with no commercials in between programmes. In this way the BBC believes that ‘the citizen is just as important as the consumer’ (Whittle, 2004, p.13) and that ‘we need to bring meaning as well as noise’ (Whittle, 2004, p.13) to the world. It is a general belief among many that the BBC is an essential part of Britain, it helps Britain to ‘think out loud, to stay connected’ (Whittle, 2004, p.7). The BBC represents the UK with outstanding documentaries and original programming that reflects Britain and provides a sense of custom and tradition: ‘we are living in a new media universe. However, the BBC continues to believe that the new universe needs to reflect some old values’ (Whittle, 2004, p.13). However, these old values may not be enough to satisfy the public’s viewing needs as we enter the era of digital television. Many people argue that the BBC needs to discover new options regarding the television licence. While there is a strong view that it should be paid by everyone because it is for everyone, there is a fear that less people will tolerate the licence fee with the temptations to turn to multi-channels with their niche-audience programming. The BBC is known for “bringing people together” because it offers programmes that whole families can enjoy. It is a depressing image that with the growing advances in technology each family member will separate themselves from each other by sitting in front of their own individual wireless laptops, computers, and flat screen televisions in order to watch their tailor made multi-channels that provide their favourite programmes.

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