

## BBC White Paper: the worst has not come to pass, but the leash is tightening

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Onwards and upwards? PA

### Author



**Richard Sambrook**

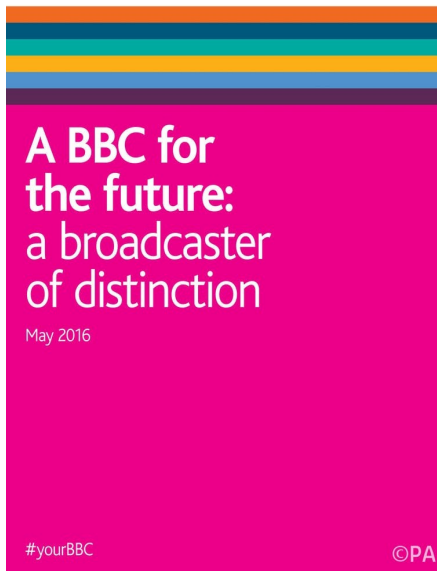
Professor of Journalism, Cardiff University

The dust is settling on the skirmishes of the past few months, now that the White Paper on the future of the BBC has been published. While many of the worst fears of the corporation's supporters have not come to pass there are still some big points of principle at stake – and a lack of detail in key areas.

The BBC had four criteria it believed needed to be met by the White Paper: clarity over funding, creative and commercial freedom and independence from government. So how do the government's proposals stack up? Firstly, the new charter is for 11 years, taking it out of the political cycle and potentially reducing the political heat around the BBC's future.

### Funding

On funding there is broadly good news. The licence fee deal struck last year is confirmed for the next 11 years, and while that deal – which loaded an extra £750m of costs for licence fees for the over-75s onto the BBC – was not a good one in itself, at least the concessions over future inflation proofing have been met.



Blueprint for BBC's next 11 years. Pa/PA Wire

The additional almost £90m a year for the World Service is confirmed for the rest of this parliament – but with no guarantees beyond that.

More significantly the White Paper accepts the principle that there should be an open and transparent process for deciding the funding of the BBC – but doesn't go into details. So, no more overnight raids in the way the last two settlements have been decided. But as yet no clarity on how it will be handled.

The new **contestable public service content fund** – which other broadcasters can bid against for public service **content such as childrens programming** – will be a pilot funded from additional and separate money from the 2015 licence fee deal. No further top slicing there. And, in future, those who

only consume the BBC through the iPlayer or online will also have to buy a licence – bad luck for the under-25s.

## Creative freedom

Rumours of **punitive scheduling rules**, moving news bulletins out of the way of the BBC's competitors, or giving the public broadcaster a greatly narrowed remit have not come to pass.

There is a new mission statement for the BBC which is intended to hold its feet to the fire of distinctive programming:

*To act in the public interest, serving all audiences with impartial, high quality and distinctive media content and services that inform, educate and entertain.*

Of course, the BBC would say that is what it already does – and it is planning to reorganise its operations around those three original pillars of public service, creating three multi-platform production divisions: BBC Inform, BBC Educate and BBC Entertain.

## Commercial freedom





Did the culture secretary pull his punches? PA/PA Wire

Here, too, the BBC seems to have got what it wanted. No provisions to sell off chunks of BBC Worldwide, its commercial subsidiary. And agreement for the principle of allowing BBC Studios to operate as an independent production arm in the market, offering programmes to other broadcasters. But, as with other areas of governance, questions of whether the BBC's commercial activities distort the market will be considered by Ofcom in future.

## Independence

It is on the crucial issue of independence that concerns will remain. The most radical proposal – well trailed and discussed – is to abandon the BBC Trust and have a “unitary board” – with Ofcom as the regulator dealing with complaints. As a principle this is sensible and supported by the BBC. Once and for all it dispenses with the contradiction of a chairman and non-executive board (of governors or trustees) seeking to be both cheerleaders and regulators.

But proposals for appointments of the non-executives to the unitary board are still problematic. The White Paper suggests 50% (at least no longer the majority) will be direct government appointments – albeit made in line with best practice for public appointments.



**Peter Hale**  
@petervhale

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Press coverage suggests this has been the area of greatest disagreement between the BBC and the government. Today the BBC said it was an area of “honest disagreement” – reserving its position in

the most conciliatory of tones. Critics of the government proposal – including senior Conservatives – suggest all appointments to the new board should be at arms length from government through an independent appointments process. For the BBC this is a fundamental principle of independence and will be the focus of debate as the White Paper moves forward.

Of less high profile, but in many ways just as serious, is the wider access given to the National Audit Office (NAO). Tabloid newspapers will already be salivating at the proposal to publish the names of “key talent” paid more than £450,000 a year. Some key talent will be thinking life may be quieter on ITV or Channel 4 as a consequence.

But the NAO’s access will potentially also take it into questions of editorial spend – which they are unqualified to judge – or into the BBC’s commercial operations. And the NAO reports to Ministers - expect more select committee grandstanding for the sake of headlines. This is where proper concern for efficiency tramples into editorial and market decision making. At heart, the conflict is between whether the BBC should be treated as a Whitehall department or recognised as Britain’s primary media brand allowed the space to compete with international giants.

There are other commitments to diversity and to the devolved nations. There are other questions about how the public’s voice is represented in oversight of the BBC.

But the government can claim this to be the most radical charter in the BBC’s history and that the leash has been significantly shortened. The BBC can be relieved that the worst of the floated proposals have not come to pass. But beneath those headlines, its independence could still be compromised and whether a tighter environment of continuing audit and review will allow the BBC to flourish in the context of dynamic global digital media is at best an open question.