

BBC Charter Green Paper: Unprecedented threat to BBC's future



*In his response to the Green Paper on the BBC Charter Review, **Steven Barnett of the University of Westminster** argues that the vision the paper sets out would severely limit the BBC's freedom to be popular and result in a small, unloved broadcaster.*

Today's **Green Paper on BBC Charter Review** represents the biggest threat to the BBC's scale, influence and effectiveness in the Corporation's history. Despite its enduring and international reputation, and despite being supported by the vast majority of UK citizens, the

tenor of this paper is an unprecedented and full frontal government assault on the BBC's role at the heart of Britain's cultural and democratic life.

By raising the question "whether audience needs are better served by a more narrowly-focused BBC", and by targeting specific entertainment programmes such as *The Voice*, the government has clearly indicated its preferred direction of travel: a smaller, less popular and more insignificant BBC. Quality popular programmes have been at the heart of the BBC's schedules since its birth, and this government's apparent willingness to emasculate the BBC's freedom to be popular will be damaging both to the nation's creative economy and to the BBC's engagement in British citizens' everyday lives.

The narrative of market impact

Much of the Green Paper's approach appears to be concerned with the BBC's impact on commercial competitors and the notion that "a smaller BBC..... would also be likely to have a reduced market impact". The detailed assessment of potential market impact on p25, which purports to lay out the "positive and negative" effect of BBC activities, produced just two desultory positive impacts (raising overall standards and investment in UK content) while detailing five negative impacts almost entirely concerned with assuaging the concerns of BBC competitors.

The idea that BBC online news activities might be scaled back appears to be fuelled by intense lobbying from **self-interested newspaper publishers** – which have been vociferously complaining about the BBC's damaging impact on their businesses through their own columns – despite the absence of any evidence that BBC regional news output damages the viability of local newspapers.

The proposed cuts in funding

One of the most potentially destructive proposals, which also featured in the Culture select committee's report when John Whittingdale was chairman, is the notion of contestable funding (p57). It suggests that, with increasing provision and diversity of media services, and with other broadcasters providing content and services with "public service characteristics".

Charter Review should consider "whether there is a case for alternative providers to be able to access an element of this funding." This has been a favourite objective for BBC sceptics for at least 25 years, and would represent an even swifter death than the current salami slicing of the licence fee.

A combination of those funding cuts already agreed and a severely circumscribed operating

vision implied by the Green Paper's proposals will, over the ten year charter period, result in a diminished and unloved rump of a BBC, as marginalised as ABC in Australia or PBS in America – an institution of little creative significance, cultural influence or journalistic reputation.



The question for David Cameron is whether he wants to go down in history as the Prime Minister who effectively dismantled one of the world's most important cultural and democratic institutions.

Some of the BBC's most popular content is entertainment & sport. Photo by Graham Holliday [CC BY-NC 2.0]

This article gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

July 16th, 2015 | [BBC Charter Review](#), [Featured](#), [Public Service Broadcasting/Media](#) | [1 Comment](#)
