

Talking Points - House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee

15th March 2022, Dr Rob Watson, robwatson@decentered.co.uk

1 Question 1

We heard from previous witnesses about how UK society is changing, with an increasingly diverse population and differing worldviews. Some have suggested we are becoming less cohesive as a national community. Is this true in your view, and to what extent should the BBC try to act as a national glue across all sectors of society?

- Yes – BBC and PSM still plays an essential role, but identity can't be imposed, it has to be facilitated.

The Committee may follow up to ask about your thoughts on the BBC seeking to balance between providing universal content on the one hand, and catering for differing needs and perspectives on the other.

- The BBC should be decentralised and federated along distributionist lines – that which can be done at the lowest level, should be done at the lowest level.
- When the NHS was formed, centralisation was essential, technology has changed since.

2 Question 2

Some sectors of UK society typically have lower engagement with the BBC – for example young people, ethnic minority viewers and those from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. We have also heard that many people across the UK feel the BBC does not reflect a wide range of worldviews. In broad terms, what do these underserved groups need and want from media, and how does that compare to what the BBC can provide?

- Community media can help plug these gaps, but it should be a Civitas, not a Universitas (Michael Oakeshott).
- Invest in people being able to make their own media, and learn how to do things for themselves.

The Committee might follow up to ask about your views on whether the BBC is failing in important areas; whether it should compete with or complement other services; and how it compares to rivals in providing content that's (a) attractive; and (b) has educational/civic value.

- The BBC should be given a much stronger mission to support public education and information, such as health, wellbeing, civic engagement, social participation. The BBC must demonstrate public value from the bottom up.

3 Question 3

How important is it to provide free-to-access, publicly funded broadcast services? Do you think it's fairer to have a universal service that everyone pays the same for, or is it better to make people pay for some parts of it?

- Universal access is essential to a thriving, liberal and social democratic society, freedom from the worst effects of the market is essential (pluralism), and able to invest in social-value activities.

The Committee might also want to hear your thoughts on what the pros & cons are of paying for some services (for example, is that fairer, or does it risk creating divisions by limiting access to content that could bind communities together?)

- There is merit in linking BBC Licence Fees with other tax indices, but work needs to be done to explain how we benefit as a united and coherent society by having access.

4 Question 4

A national broadcaster needs to have legitimacy and add value across the nation. This includes reaching underserved communities and reflecting a range of worldviews. What are the most effective ways this could be improved?

- Drop the obsession with the BBC competing on the world stage and being a global player. People in the UK come first.
- Change the editorial model and more directly relevant through citizen participation.

The Committee might want to follow up to ask how much weight should be given to this issue in future decisions on BBC funding.

- Turn the BBC into a cooperative or mutual society – with a national citizenship investment fund.
- The licence fee will need to be shifted to other modes of revenue generation, such as digital service taxes and collaborative production using the social-value model.

5 Media Landscape

- Commercial media is about convenience and distraction.
- Public Service media is about universal provision and professional standards.
- Social media is about personalisation and decentralisation of content.
- Community media is about access to media and care for communities.

6 Key principles of Community Radio

- Community media sits within the civic and mutual sector and is part of the social economy – not-for-profit, mutual, charitable.
- Community media is driven by social value, community development principles, and civic capacity building.
- Community media seeks to ‘de-professionalise’ media.
- Community Media travels at the speed of trust.
- Shouldn’t be viewed as a stepping-stone into the media industries.

7 Amendments to the Broadcasting and Communications Acts

- Communications Act 2003, Community Radio Order 2004, SSDAB 2018
- Access to and participation in the radio production process.
- Taking responsibility for self-produced media (DIY)
- Licenced Community Radio is subject to the Ofcom Broadcast Code.
- Development of citizens supporting dialogue about local democracy, services, community issues.
- Self-governance, independent financing and community accountability.

8 When Done Well Community Media Fosters

- Capacity-building for localised representation and expression of opinions.
- Serves people who are often overlooked and are voiceless in mainstream conversations.
- Supports social identity, representation and communities of association.
- Embeds self-management and accountability for media within a specific community.
- Community Media is 10% media and 90% community development.
- Community Media is initiated in places, serving the needs of a specific communities of interest or identity.
- Volunteers come from and represent their communities – desire to put something back.
- Community Media is decentralised, with no single structure or process to follow.
- Community Media is a movement, not a sector – not well served by ‘trade bodies.’
- Community Media is a patchwork of different people figuring out what suits their needs and circumstances.

9 Contrasted With

- BBC is top-down and centrally constituted.
- Commercial media is increasingly consolidated, both geographically and technically (i.e. formats).
- Community Media is under resourced – not just financially – but in recognition of its role as a facilitator of civic expression and catalyst for social change.

- Community Journalism often supports alternative news provision, but not self-representation.
- Public authorities, civic and charitable organisations are wedded to mass-media marketing and consumer-comms model.
- Ofcom's role is focussed on economic and technical regulation, and is less examined in terms of citizenship.

10 Community Media Needs

- Strategic help with social and civic capacity building.
- Recognition of its role as a trusted vehicle for social action messages.
- Cross governmental role – i.e. introductions to other government departments, not just media.
- Recognition of importance of Media Literacies and Civic Literacies embedded at the neighbourhood level.
- Support for role of community reporting – i.e. non-professional news.
- Ofcom must include Community Media in its Media Diversity reporting – it's said to be too difficult.
- A review of SSDAB's low-cost status – it's not affordable for many.
- C-DSP water-down the commitment to training, access and local provision.
- More than enough capacity on AM/FM especially if major networks are shifted to DAB (Norway).
- A full Equalities evaluation of the way Ofcom assess and accounts for the role of community media is essential.
- Develop local media hubs that bring together local government agencies to foster independent and local community media, with focus on health, citizenship, education, skills, etc..

11 Future Needs

- Don't forget legacy media – still essential for public communication.
- Podcasting, streaming, IP services
- Decentralisation – post-institutional social and economic value.
- Accountability and responsibility in social media – countering misinformation.
- Social economy entrepreneurship – multi-purpose media engagement based on social value.
- Enhanced citizenship support.

12 Examples

12.1 Leicester Community Radio

- Leicester is a good exemplar for community radio - longest Covid-19 lockdown in the UK.
- Low levels of educational attainment, English as first language, low-skills employment.
- Underserved by independent media, hard for BBC to keep up with pace of diversification.
- Good network of community radio stations in the city, serving different needs.
- Leicester Community Radio – committed to the Covid-RSL and support for most reluctant group of people to take up vaccines.

12.2 Soundart Radio

- Takes a creative approach to programming that suits the interests of the volunteers (Totnes).
- Not focussed on 'formats' or so-called 'professionalised' styles of presentation.
- Encourages participation and engagement for people who would not access mainstream media.

12.3 SparkFM & Radio Lab

- Integrated into university courses (Sunderland & Bedfordshire).
- Provides an accessible route into the 'professionalised' media industries.
- Allows for experimentation and inclusion of voices and stories otherwise not covered.

13 Melodic Distraction

- Online radio service in Liverpool, originating in events and social businesses.

- Provides a platform for music culture that reflects diversity of interests – programmes connect people.
- Not interested in an Ofcom licence, as too onerous to manage – prefer to do their own thing.

14 Mention

- Media Reform Coalition [BBC and Beyond](#): Manifesto for a People's Media – Debs Grayson.
- [Better Media](#) – membership organisation with DAO principles.
- [Federal Agency for Civic Education](#) – Germany (could this include health and other social skills).
- [PINF](#), [Bureau Local](#) and [Institute of Community Reporters](#).

15 My Recent Activity

- Assisting Leicester Community Radio to [apply for C-DSP](#) licence for SSDAB.
- Assisting Evington Echo [update editorial policies](#) and join IMPRESS.
- Working with IN-CJ to develop a '[community communications' model](#) for criminal justice development.
- Director of Leicester Digital Partnership, a [community bid for SSDAB multiplex](#).
- Evaluation of Futures 2020/21 [research and public engagement](#) with community radio.
- Germ's Journey project support – role of community media for [public health communications](#).
- Leicester Stories – census messaging and community reporting for Leicester [census engagement](#).

16 Analogies

- **Convenience Food:** the market brings great advantages and diversity in choice at different price-points, but we can lose sight of our culture if we only shop for convenient and well packed food-like stuff. In the UK we've ended up with the highest rate of obesity and diabetes in Europe, so the free market is not a panacea, and must be balanced with strategic health and education services, and with population-wide food literacies and capabilities.
- **Music:** No one tells the public what music format they should buy. There is a resurgence of sales of vinyl, even while streaming services are now widely available and more convenient. Why should Ofcom dictate that we implement SSDAB when other forms of spectrum are still widely available?



