Service review: BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Four, Consultation Response from the British Humanist Association, December 2009

About the British Humanist Association (BHA)

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

The BHA is deeply committed to human rights, equality, democracy, and an end to irrelevant discrimination, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society. In such a society people of all beliefs would have equal treatment before the law, and the rights of those with all beliefs to hold and live by them would be reasonably accommodated within a legal framework setting minimum common legal standards.

In today's large and complex society, broadcasting - especially public service broadcasting - is one of the main ways in which citizens and communities can learn about and from each other; it is also one of the main sources of information for large numbers of people. The BHA campaigns for an end to the privileged position of religion in broadcasting and for inclusion of programmes about Humanism.

1. **How well are BBC One, BBC Two and BBC Four performing against the terms of their services licences?**

The BBC1- service licence states:

> "It should be the BBC's primary outlet for major UK and international events and it should reflect the whole of the UK in its output."
>
> "BBC One should show high quality, landmark factual programmes in peak and other viewing times. These should be in genres such as natural history, history and science, and feature a range of documentary, leisure, social action and religious output."
>
> "Other BBC One output – such as documentary, current affairs and drama - should reflect and explore the diversity of UK society. The channel should also cover religion, including some high impact religious programming in peaktime."
>
> "BBC One should: With BBC Two, broadcast at least 110 hours of religious programming each year."

BBC2- service licence states:

> "BBC Two should deliver its remit with factual programming that broadens horizons. There should be peaktime coverage of science, history, business, arts and culture, religion, passions and leisure pursuits, as well as documentaries and current affairs."
>
> "Its output should explore many aspects of the UK's diversity including religion, ethics, and the issues facing minority groups. Some of this output should be in peaktime."

"BBC Two should: With BBC One, broadcast at least 110 hours of religious programmes each year"

BBC4- service licence states:

"BBC Four should play its part in supporting this purpose amongst its audience. Within its defined remit, the channel should stimulate, support and reflect the diversity of the UK. It should record and broadcast performance from the nations and regions, including key festivals around the UK and should also create occasions that bring people together and allow them to express local culture. It will also cover issues of faith, spirituality and ethics."

Our response

The BHA does not consider that a commitment to having 110 hours of religious programmes each year, and specifically covering religion and faith, reflects the whole of the UK, or lives up to the commitment to reflect and explore the diversity of UK society.

The service licences bear out all that we have said in previous responses (enclosed) about the failure of the BBC to take on board the need not to discriminate between religious and non-religious beliefs in its broadcast output. Our arguments on this subject are summarised below:

a) The BBC almost totally fails to reflect the community of people with non-religious beliefs that are broadly humanist. The BBC has hitherto consistently refused to acknowledge that such non-religious beliefs are worthy of attention in their own right. As a consequence it fails to reflect back to the nation the belief of Humanism in an adequate and fair manner. This fails to give humanists the opportunity to hear their beliefs expertly discussed and so examine their own beliefs critically. It also fails to give others the opportunity to understand the beliefs of a significant section of the population. It is symptomatic of the BBC's failure in these regards that we feel compelled to add that Humanism is a positive lifestance and not mere atheism.

b) The BBC is obliged by legislation to recognise the full diversity of religion or belief. For example, the BBC as a public authority is covered by the Human Rights Act 1998.

Section 6 of that Act says:-

> 6. - (1) It is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right. . .
> (6) "An act" includes a failure to act . . .

It is incompatible with Convention rights guaranteed under Article 9 read in conjunction with Article 14 to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief.

In this phrase the word "belief" includes non-religious beliefs. This interpretation has been confirmed both in commentary on international human rights instruments and in legal cases under the European Convention. The interpretation is now beyond doubt.

Section 52(1) of the Equality Act 2006 reads:

> It is unlawful for a public authority exercising a function to do any act which constitutes discrimination.

In addition, subsections 264(6) (f) and (g) and 264(13) of the Communications Act 2003, make it clear that public service broadcasting should include:
"a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with . . . religion and other beliefs, where 'belief' means a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles **. . .**"

c) It should be noted that the word "belief" needs to be understood in a strong sense, as is shown by comparison with the corresponding words in the French and German versions of the European Convention on Human Rights. Humanism is such a non-religious belief - indeed, it is plainly the principal such belief found in the United Kingdom. It is therefore legally incumbent on the BBC not to discriminate unfairly between religion(s) and Humanism.

The BBC's failure to provide programmes dealing explicitly with non-religious beliefs such as Humanism means that people are unable to find out through the most important medium by which ideas are discussed and presented about the lifestance so many of them are individually adopting. Further, the BBC's persistence in allowing Christianity to have a monopoly of almost all airtime devoted to the uninterrupted exposition of any philosophy or belief system, insidiously suggests that there is no other valid basis for living. The BBC thereby does serious disservice both to individuals - particularly the young who are increasingly non-religious[1]- and to society at large.

Regrettably, the current service licences are riddled with such discrimination. Indeed, there is not a single paragraph where religion is mentioned that also mentions non-religious beliefs. The drafting is systematically discriminatory and means that BBC1, BBC2 and BBC4 are continually failing to ensure a reflection of the full diversity of the UK. In doing so, they are also failing to meet the requirements of the BBC as written in legislation.

- **To what extent are licence fee payers aware of and using the services, and are some demographic groups better served than others?**

The BHA believe that an important demographic (i.e. humanists and other non-religious people) are not served equally by the current services. An Ipsos MORI poll in 2006 found that 36% of people are humanist in their basic outlook.[2] Even the misleadingly low[3] figures in the 2001 census consider at least 15.5% of the population as non-religious making this the second largest "belief" group in the UK. This demographic group are not being served as their beliefs are not treated equally; indeed they have been continually ignored and sidelined as religious programming continues to dominate. (When humanists appear on programmes it is either in some other capacity or as a foil to religious guests dealing with a religious agenda.)

- **Are the services delivering high quality and distinctive content across the full range of television genres?**

In order to cover the full range of issues within the religion and ethics topic, the BBC must increase coverage of Humanism and non-religious content (i.e. content specifically aimed at

[1] "Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds" published by the Department for Education and Skills in 2004, stated that two thirds of 12-19 yes olds did not regard themselves as belonging to any religion and also states that among 18 to 24 year olds, 60 per cent said they did not belong to a religion (as did 56 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds).
http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf

[2] http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=190

[3] Please see http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/census-2011 for full details.

non-religious people as a demographic) so as to reflect more fully the range of beliefs in the UK.

- **Are the services making an effective contribution to delivering the BBC's public purposes?**

The BBC public purposes state,

- "Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities
    - Represent the different nations, regions and communities to the rest of the UK.
    - Cater for the different nations, regions and communities of the UK.
    - Reflect the different religious and *other beliefs* in the UK." (our emphasis)

The BHA does not believe that the services are making an effective contribution to this section of the BBC public purposes. Indeed, for the reasons stated above and in the enclosed documents, we do not believe that Humanism and other non-religious beliefs are reflected in the services of the BBC as a whole.

- **Are the services delivering good value for money?**

The BHA has no opinion on this.

2. **Are BBC One, BBC Two and BBC Four equipped to deliver their service licence commitments in the future, in particular to meet audience expectations of high quality and distinctive content? Do the services have appropriate strategies in place? Are resources appropriately allocated to meet objectives?**

The BHA has no opinion on this.

3. **Should the service licences for BBC One, BBC Two and BBC Four be changed?**

Yes. All references to religion, religious output/programming, or faith should be changed to 'religion and non-religious beliefs'. (Please see the enclosed document *British Humanist Association response to BBC trust's consultation on service licences* Annex II for full details.)

What do you want the BBC Trust to keep confidential?
Nothing.

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