

Britain: Should the Left Defend the BBC Against Johnson?

Monday 24 May 2021, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2021).

In an ever-crowded media space, Dave Kellaway asks if the state broadcaster is fit for the 21st Century?

“Far better to draw on the promise of public media that the BBC still embodies, its accrued legitimacy, infrastructure and expertise, and to repurpose it towards genuinely public and democratic purposes.”

Defending the BBC is not enough

The diametrically opposed but equally wrong second response is to take a purely defensive approach. This sugar coats the reality of the BBC and is the classic liberal and social democratic response. It proposes maybe some different personnel and a few more regulations but essentially treats the BBC like a national treasure that is fundamentally a good thing. You can actually end up protecting a certain patrician Oxbridge ownership of what constitutes good culture and political reporting.

What about the license fee? Its strength is recognition that the BBC is a universal public service potentially serving all of the people, unlike the corporate subscription services who are not interested in any broadcasting areas that are not profitable. One example of this link to a public service ethos is the way the license fee has helped maintain the Welsh language through the development of a distinct channel in Wales.

Sky, Netflix, and other companies build parcels of services to particular demographics. There is no coherent universal service and whole areas are ignored. It can also be argued that a not-for-profit service means that no money is diverted to private shareholders and any surplus can be fed back into making good quality programmes. The income generated by worldwide sales of **Planet Earth** work exactly in that way. Capitalists sell information, education, and culture through its development of restrictive markets. We want to make them accessible to everyone. A radical transformation of the BBC could involve the building of an alternative to the current commercial digital platforms. It could complement Labour’s manifesto promise of free, universal broadband.

Retaining the license fee would also entail making it fairer so those who can afford more should pay their fair share. A body independent of government would control it and make recommendations for any increases. It could be paid through the internet service providers. Linking it to the council tax would make it fairer.

The Media Reform Group, of whom Tom Mills is a leading member, has developed a [whole programme](#) for how to transform the BBC. Its demands can be used to mobilise people now and point to a progressive future for the broadcasting media. Ideas include elections by license payers

and staff for the BBC board of governors - cutting out the government appointments of the key posts and then the appointment by them of other board members. There would also be governance on a regional and national basis with further elections. Regulation would take into account the public interest rather than market considerations as much of it does today. Commissioning of programming should also be democratised and involve the whole community. Delivering on diversity, including class, would be another priority.

Despite all its weaknesses the BBC still represents a gain for working people that should be defended against privatisation. We need to build the widest possible unity to defend it and engage the debate about what a transformed BBC would look like. Demands for its autonomy, democratisation, and its potential to unleash popular creativity can be raised as part of a mobilisation for a socialist alternative. Enjoying public TV without advertising might seem a small thing but it is expressive of a space for culture and information that limits the control of corporate power and the market. Let's not forget it.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 30 March 2021:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/should-the-left-defend-the-bbc-against-johnson/>