



Feb 24, 2020 15:24 GMT

EXPERT COMMENT: BBC - the licence fee is a small price to pay for a service that unites the UK

Tom May, Postgraduate Researcher at Northumbria University, writes for The Conversation about the BBC licence fee.

Anyone who owns a television set in the UK is obliged, by law, [to pay a licence fee](#) which has always enabled the BBC to exist as an independent entity. But a recent [Sunday Times article \(paywalled\)](#) has announced the UK government's intention to abolish the BBC licence fee.

It is, I believe, a move that will jeopardise the BBC and the services it provides. The Corporation should be defended as a national public utility that provides unique and irreplaceable programming for different audiences. The subscription model proposed, we're told, by Dominic Cummings (apparently [at odds](#) with the views of the prime minister, Boris Johnson) would simply not enable the full array of services that the BBC provides. Not only that but the recently reappointed culture secretary [John Whittingdale](#) has said a subscription model was "utterly impossible" at present.

As the New Statesman's political editor Stephen Bush has [argued](#), this portends a long game of political interference in the run-up to the BBC's Charter Renewal in 2027, with the aim to constrain and reduce the BBC's remit.

Is the BBC actually worth defending? Well, it is an organisation that, in its DNA, cleaves to the consensual "centre ground" of the day – recently, it has mimicked the agenda of a printed press overwhelmingly aligned with the Conservative Party's worldview, as a Loughborough University report [has found](#). But then plenty of influential people also [accuse the BBC of left bias](#).

Is it time to accept British society's atomisation? In an article for this platform, academic Lyndsay Duthie [quotes The Sun's report](#) that 3.5 million people have refused to pay the licence fee. Clearly, a growing, vocal minority may not use the BBC at all. Having said this, people's attitudes often change when they are deprived of the BBC, as [this study suggests](#):

Thirty-three out of the 48 households who originally said they would prefer to not pay at all and not receive the BBC, or who wanted to pay a lower licence fee, changed their minds and said they were now willing to pay the full licence fee for the BBC.

What of the government's own reasoning for replacing the licence fee? As Goldsmiths professor of media Des Freedman [has argued](#), it is "absurd" to claim the BBC is obsolete due to unstable, debt-ridden streaming services such as Netflix, Disney and Comcast. Netflix doesn't have CBBC. Disney doesn't broadcast British national events. Not yet, anyway.

Better, surely, to maintain the BBC as a universally accessible utility. As the Byline Times journalist James Melville [has asserted](#), the BBC is an informational and cultural counterpart to the NHS – it possesses an

astonishingly rich archive, which it should do more to put on offer to people. In its necessary desire to appeal to young people, the Corporation neglects its past. Dad's Army repeats regularly gain over a million viewers – such shows are part of our cultural fabric and linger in our lexicon.

Lasting achievements

It would do well to repeat more of the series that I am studying for my PhD – the one-off dramas that made up [Play for Today](#), which ran from 1970 to 1984. This was usually broadcast on BBC1 on Tuesdays after the Nine O'Clock News. Many episodes dramatised contentious or topical issues and it nurtured idiosyncratic voices from different nations, regions and classes in the UK, the likes of Alan Bennett, Dennis Potter, Peter McDougall, Mike Leigh, Rachel Billington and Colin Welland.

Most people are aware of Jeremy Sandford and Ken Loach's Cathy Come Home (1966), which contributed to a change in public consciousness that led to the creation of the [homelessness charity Shelter](#). We should also remember the likes of [Peter Ransley's](#) Minor Complications (1980) which dramatised medical negligence in the NHS and [led to the creation](#) of Action against Medical Accidents charity, which has had some impact in making the NHS more open.

The government claims the BBC has to “modernise”. Well, listen to Ian Wright's recent [appearance](#) on that formerly fusty “crown jewel” Desert Island Discs and try to tell me it hasn't renewed itself or that this alone is not worthy of your £3.

Tory MPs on Twitter have defended the BBC against Cummings's sword of Damocles – taking the view that by privatising the BBC the UK risks losing an institution of incalculable value to preserving social order.

A national service

All of us – regardless of political hue – should recall the BBC's role in defeating Nazi Germany in the second world war and its credible honest brokerage during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. As media academic Jean Seaton has [detailed](#), it was instrumental in laying the infrastructural groundwork for reconciliation – along with key actors across the sectarian

divide and in the Major and Blair governments.

The last thing we need is further entrenchment of the same commercially driven values that have undermined the local British press for so long, as the journalist Matthew Engel [has argued](#). Turning the BBC into an elitist redoubt – leaving a gaping hole in the public sphere – ignores the testimony of a past chairman of governors Sir Michael Swann in the Annan Report (1977), resulting from a Royal Commission, which argued for pluralistic public service broadcasting and led to the creation of Channel Four.

Swann claims the BBC's broadcasting works as "social cement" for UK society – and it's vital to defend the current model whereby minority interests, including local radio stations, BBC Radio Cymru, BBC Asian Network, contemporary urban music on BBC 1Xtra or classical music on Radio 3, are all supported by the greater number of Radio 2 and 4 listeners. Paying £3 a week means that anyone in Britain can listen to these stations – not just the audiences they implicitly target. And more such listening would aid our understanding of other people's ways of life on the British Isles.

To paraphrase what was once said in the BBC's most famous telefantasy drama, Doctor Who: "A cosmos without the BBC scarcely bears thinking about." Without the BBC and its unique potential to give voice to all of its constituent regions, nations and classes, the UK will struggle to continue as it is one of the few institutions capable of holding together a fractious nation state.

This article was originally published on The Conversation, find it on their website [here](#).

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