

THE BBC AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

CREATIVE LECTURE BY SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH
LONDON – APRIL 30, 2008

Chaired by Kirsty Wark

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

The following is an edited version of the discussion following Sir David's speech on April 30, 2008. To hear the whole discussion please go to the audio recording of the event.

Sir Cyril Taylor CBE: I'm here representing the Specialists Schools and Academies Trust which now works with 3,000 English secondary schools and we have talked with Mark Thompson in the past about making available the extraordinary archives of the BBC for use within the classroom. For some reason or other this initiative doesn't seem to have taken off, and I think it's a great shame that our education couldn't have the benefit of the most amazing films the BBC has made over the years.

Kirsty Wark (KW): Are you looking for an endorsement from David Attenborough?

David Attenborough (DA): I am speaking as a private individual, and I'm not privy to what the management of the BBC today thinks or does. The prospect is a very attractive one, but there are quite a lot of problems, not least of which is copyright. There are a lot of contractual difficulties about people who wrote the words, people who wrote the music, the camera man and so on. I know the BBC is struggling with them, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the BBC as an institution would be overjoyed to make that available. In my own area, and I suppose I can speak about this, there has within the past year been a fusion between the Natural History Museum and the BBC Natural History Unit in which I've been involved, in order to try and make that fantastic archive that you described [available]. And showing animals actually live and doing things alongside the academic and scientific expertise from the Natural History Museum, so that the two can come together and visitors to the Museum can get an unrivalled education and insight into the natural world. And I hope that sort of thing could expand over a much greater area. But that is for the BBC and not me.

Stephen Lotinga, Policy, Liberal Democrats: David, you briefly mentioned the cuts to factual programming. Can you expand upon what you see as the implications to the future of the BBC and public service broadcasting of making cuts to the news and factual programmes whilst maintaining things like BBC3?

DA: I can't answer that, I'm afraid, because as I say, although you may think from some of the things I've said that I've been speaking on behalf of the BBC, I'm not on behalf of the BBC. I'm just a contributor so I don't know.

Dr Hamish R P Meldrum, Chairman, British Medical Association: How much do you think a public service broadcaster should reflect society and how much do you think it should try to lead society? I'm particularly thinking of things like encouraging healthy lifestyles. Is there a danger that in order to capture audiences you tend to reflect rather than to do the more difficult task of trying to lead and educate?

DA: It's an interesting balance that you have to select, and from my own experience in the past, we used to do medical programmes called *Your Life in Their Hands*, and we had a very distinguished doctor who was not allowed to use his name because of the restrictions of the BMA. He was convinced that there was a link between tobacco smoking and lung cancer, and he very courageously insisted on speaking about it and was in huge trouble with the BMA. And that was an example of the BBC taking a view, deciding that one way or another this view ought to be heard in spite of the tobacco companies. Now, that's one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum is telling people what they've got to eat, or what's healthy, or some of the more controversial aspects of how you treat your body. Some of which may conceivably be mistaken. The BBC will take an attitude on these, and should, but it's a question of fine judgement. Society as a whole doesn't actually exist. It only exists as a multitude of different opinions, and the BBC's job, it seems to me, is to pick out those particular opinions here and there and try and do so as responsibly as they can. There is an issue at the moment of course about climate change. And five years, 10 years ago, it was controversial whether in fact there was climate change and whether human beings were responsible or not. The BBC, I think quite courageously, decided that from the evidence it was incontrovertible scientifically and they would go with it. And they did. With, I think, very salutary effects.

Owen Gibson, *The Guardian*: Sir David, how important do you think the concept of plurality in public service broadcasting is? That is, the existence of, say, a Channel 4 to provide competition and counterpoints to the BBC? The reason I ask this particularly is because your own area, natural history, is one in which there really hasn't been much competition to the BBC and yet excellence has obviously been maintained. So I wonder whether you think that's an important principle or not?

DA: Well it isn't true that there hasn't been competition for the BBC from commercial television. Anglia Television set up a very distinguished natural history group. Aubrey Buxton started it when he was chairman and they did very well. They gave us a run for our money and quite right too. And it's a matter of interest as to why they have fallen by the wayside. And of course the answer inevitably – I would put a pound to a penny – was because it wasn't making enough money, very understandably. And ITV has got to take its commercial revenues, and its shareholders want to know where they are going. So yes, as long as it's commercially viable, the BBC has this huge advantage that it can take things when they are no longer in ITV's view or the commercial television view commercially viable and support them. That is the reason for the BBC to be there. That is what public service broadcasting does. They can start something they know is not going to be in any

commercial sense viable and stick with it. That's what they should be doing, and certainly, if they care about public service broadcasting, that's what public service broadcasting should do.

John Geraint, Green Bay Media: I'll call myself an independent producer, although perhaps I should say I'm a 'commercial' producer. It's a question not so much about competition but about diversity and plurality. If, as your lecture seems to be suggesting, there's only one type of organisation and perhaps only one organisation that can produce public service broadcasting – that is a corporation with an in-house production arm – isn't there a danger that we'll be left with only one type of approach to broadcasting and to issues of social relevance, and perhaps an establishment approach?

DA: I don't think so because after all the opportunity is there. Nobody has said to ITV 'You must not produce natural history programmes'. If they can do so, good luck to them. The point about public service broadcasting is that you are able to take subjects which independent television can't tackle for one reason or another. Now the question is, do you leave that commercial situation as it is, or do you find some other way of subsidising it? What I was trying to suggest was that the business of subsidising strands, of saying 'okay, that's very good but I gather that your bosses say that they can't afford it, so we'll give you so much money to produce it', and then to tell the network where they are going to place it – that produces a degree of organisational or bureaucratic complexity and also changes the nature of the schedule. So it's very difficult.

KW: Do you think that it's healthy to have competition in programme areas? You were suggesting that the BBC as a public service broadcaster is the place for all these things. You've got Discovery making wonderful programmes as well. You know, *The Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, things like that. Would you regard those as public service type programmes?

DA: No. And indeed I am very keen on Discovery. We co-operate with Discovery, but Discovery is ruled and changes its policies according to its income. What I'm saying is that public service broadcasting, offers opportunities based on a licence, which commercial and commercially based organisations find extremely difficult to replicate or to compete with.

KW: Is it healthy only to have one? For example are you suggesting that the BBC should be, as it were, the receptacle and the wellspring of all public service broadcasting?

DA: Well, the alternative is what? That you decide that there is one of these networks that you're going to set up which is going to take a section of the licence? At the moment there are plenty of means of discovering whether the BBC is grossly profligate, and you might say there is an argument that it is. In which case, you are going to winnow things down and make sure that it is not profligate. But if it is actually producing things in an efficient

way, you are going to take a section of the licence money, which already plenty of people are saying is too high, and you are going to add to it.

Roy Ackerman, Creative Director, Diverse Production: Just on this plurality thing, I think there's a lot of people, both within the BBC and outside, who think that Channel 4 is in part public service broadcasters by its remit and the way it works and it's not just putting on lone, programmes that are damaging the network. But I wanted to move to another area. You said earlier that introducing audiences to ideas they have not encountered is a key part of public service broadcasting, and I think I certainly agree. What do you think about the fact that, in a period where there is almost limitless choice of channels on broadband and digital, it's now very, very, hard to sell an idea on a subject that people don't know? So if you go to almost any network – I think even including BBC 4 – with a subject no one has heard of, you are nearly always told it's niche and that it's very difficult for people to 'find it' because it's not a subject that people have read about or seen in the bookshops. I think there is a real danger that getting subject matters that people haven't heard of from some other source onto any broadcast network, or any kind of network at all, is getting harder. I wondered what you think could be done to address that?

DA: I absolutely do think it is, and to the extent that the BBC doesn't do that, it is failing in its responsibilities as public service broadcasters, that was indeed my point. This is the one area where independents can sow ideas, and some criticism that I might have of the BBC now is that the mere proliferation of fashionable, popular programmes is clogging up the network and preventing the sort of acceptance which you describe. The sort of new programmes, new attitudes that you describe. [To the] extent that that happens, I'm entirely with you. It is critical. Having tried to schedule programmes myself, I know perfectly well that there are plenty of people, commercially and politically, who are waiting round the corner with a club to clobber the BBC on the grounds that it's lost audiences. I think the BBC always has to look at the size of its audience; it cannot afford to become totally minority. But it can use its mixed network to increase audiences for the very sorts of programmes that you describe.

Jocelyn Hay, Voice of the Listener and Viewer: David, you were saying about the licence fee, the unique and privileged position it gives the BBC. We certainly agree with you there. However, a lot of people at the moment are saying that the licence fee will be untenable in future as competition increases from the proliferating channels. Could I ask two questions. One is, how do you see the viability of the licence fee in the future? And secondly, can you see a future for any public service remit on the commercially funded channels as they used to be?

David Attenborough: Well, taking first things first. One hears all the time that the licence fee is not sustainable. I have to say that I find it a somewhat mysterious argument. We don't say that in a reasonable town the swimming baths should no longer have a section from the rates because 50 per cent of the people are using them. Or that libraries should be removed from the city because not everybody needs them. I personally am very happy

that sections of my rates should pay for those sort of facilities, and it seems to me that the majority paying for a whole variety of facilities that people can have, even though the majority don't take them, is a measure of a civilised society. So why are people saying [for] the BBC the licence money is no longer sustainable, or won't be? It isn't that we have lost the majority of the audience. The niche audiences, as I have explained, are a tiny, tiny, part of the audience. That's not the reason; there must be other reasons why you should not want to have a public service organisation. For one thing it takes a lot of viewers away from commercial networks. And there are a lot of people who take the view that the BBC's line – certainly in political dialogues – is sometimes a bit over the top, and they don't wish them to behave like that. And you've seen lots of examples of that, where people have come out with a big tub saying 'You've got to watch it because your licence fee is in danger'. This debate is not about licence fees, this debate is about public service broadcasting, and the licence fee debate has receded for a bit because of coming to certain conclusions, but it will never disappear, that's for sure. And all I can say is that if you think what the BBC has achieved over its career, and particularly if you go outside this country and look at it from different perspectives, that has only been possible because [it's a] licence-based organisation. And if the BBC loses its licence it will certainly lose its public service aspect.

Dennis Blakeway, independent producer: Sir David, I'm very interested in what you say, and while I agree with it almost completely, what do you think about the challenge of new generations who are watching television in a completely different way and have no loyalty. I'm certain they won't have loyalty to networks in the future, will watch television on their computers, will have little concept of the BBC. How can public service broadcasting and the BBC, while remaining loyal to what you say, meet the challenge of the new generations of viewers?

David Attenborough: A very good question, but I am absolutely astounded by the loyalty or the sluggishness or the immovability or robustness, as I notice OFCOM calls it, of the audience's loyalty to channels. It is absolutely extraordinary. And if you look at the big numbers – they have diminished a bit certainly but by and large the bulk of the population watch the big two, the big three, big four plus and I believe that will go on. The communications which the young have, with one thing and another, I'm sure will all have their role. But at the moment it seems to me it still remains remarkably stable. And I am astonished.

Richard Bradley, Lion Television: A lot of the discussion about public service broadcasting recently has been about the funding of broadcasters. I'm interested in the next generation of programme makers and how concerned you are that, in an environment where programme makers, for better or worse, are judged on the ratings their programmes get, the mechanisms exist for the new generation of public service programme makers and whether they are in good health?

David Attenborough: I don't really know the answer, but as everybody in this room will certainly know, the proportion of independents in the schedule is prescribed. And I gather that there have been a lot of arguments about [this]. I would like to suppose that they will continue to sustain themselves because it's a great area to come from and they are absolutely free, of course, to offer their productions to other networks that are around. The question is why do the other networks not take them? The reasons, I have suggested, are commercial, and I am not regarding that as a dirty word. I'm just saying that the converse is that the BBC ought to be taking more risks if it's got a public service remit.

George Entwistle, BBC: How much creative effort should producers of public service programmes that traditionally get lower audiences put in to try to get bigger audiences for those programme genres?

David Attenborough: Well, it depends on your leaders and the programme schedulers, what they are trying to do. I can only speak from when I was one. If you gave a commitment to archaeology, say, and it started off with a very, very, small audience you see how you are going to increase that audience. That is not necessarily to change the programme in a fundamental way. It may be that you find that a certain presenter is not as good as you thought he was, or it may be the competition, it may be the time it was shown and so on. But as long as it's just marginally increasing its size, you're okay. It's when the tiny audience just diminishes into invisibility that you've got to worry.

Kirsty Wark: But you seemed to be suggesting that a particular area about which you felt passionately was being a bit neglected – early evening popular science programmes like *Tomorrow's World*.

David Attenborough: Absolutely. In this day and age, when all of us – this is a scientific-based society – are saying if you want a decent society with people making informed decisions and political decisions of one kind or another, they have to have a basic understanding of the principles of science, it seems to me very, very sad that there aren't things like *Tomorrow's World*, which was a very inventive programme, and other programmes too.

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