

# The future of the BBC: the debate continues

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Julia Ziemer reflects on a debate at the 2015 [Cheltenham Literature Festival](#) with Melvyn Bragg, James Purnell, Charlotte Higgins and Anne McElvoy.

With the looming prospect of the [Charter renewal](#) in 2016, debates about the direction and purpose of the BBC are coming thick and fast.

The packed debate in Cheltenham Town Hall brought together a range of commentators who each had their own stake in the BBC and circled around a number of themes: funding models, the wider media landscape, the relationship with the government and a more nebulous idea of ‘value.’

Predictably the most vociferous defender of the BBC’s current modus operandi was BBC Director of Strategy and Digital James Purnell who declared:

*“If the BBC didn’t exist today, it would be right to invent it.”*



But across the panel was a shared respect towards the ‘Beeb’ as it’s fondly called, and agreement that it is an ingrained part of the fabric of British life like “the weather or the monarchy or the armed forces” as The Guardian’s Charlotte Higgins explained.

Higgins, whose recent book [‘This New Noise’](#) charts the history of the BBC to the present day, brought a useful historical context to the discussion, recalling the organisation’s founding ideology from 1922 to “provide a service” available to all and how the founding Director General John Reith wanted to “use Broadcasting to make Britain a better place” arguing for government ownership on the grounds that the service was “too important to remain in entirely commercial hands.”

## Business models

*Evening Standard* and *Economist* journalist Anne McElvoy took a more critical stance, arguing that the market the BBC inhabits is in extreme flux and that instead of decrying any disruption as a sign that the corporation was being “dismantled”, it should adopt a more open and adaptable stance. With the prospect of 10 years guaranteed funding- a situation not available to any of its competitors- the corporation was in a privileged position that meant it was danger of feeling like it didn’t need to innovate.

James Purnell argued that the BBC’s current place in the media ecosystem was overall a positive one, pushing other players to create better content and that the security of 10 years funding gave them the space to approach broadcasting with the sense of ‘moral duty’ that they were part of creating ‘a public space.’ He defended the licence fee model of funding as more popular than ever, explaining how an alternative subscription model idea would prove costly and elitist (citing Sky’s statistics on the cost of marketing their subscription model.)

## Harsh realities

Overshadowing the discussion was the controversial [funding deal](#) struck with the UK government in July that saw the BBC management agree to a real term 20% cut over five years and to shoulder the payment of free licenses for the over-75s. Melvyn Bragg spoke out against the deal as “a line that was crossed” in the way it was imposed and James Purnell agreed the current ‘unilateral process’ in which the Secretary of State had the power to enact a deal without wider consultation, needed to be changed.



The deal sparked renewed concerns for the BBC’s independence and impartiality from the government, and the questions was raised by the audience several times. The debate, Higgins pointed out, goes as far back as the BBC coverage during the 1926 General Strike and doesn’t look likely to go away.

## A new, Open BBC?

As far as the BBC’s own vision for the future, there was almost unilateral skepticism about the recently announced plans for the BBC’s ‘[Ideas Service](#)’ proposed for the next Charter period. Higgins remarked that the scheme- which proposes a new partnership way of working involving sharing content of key academic, artistic and science intuitions – seemed to show the corporation “scrabbling around to find an idea to get approval of government rather than an actual genuine *need*.”

With no firm agreement reached on the future direction of the corporation from the panelists, what was clear was the importance of the BBC to all of them for different reasons. The final thought on what the BBC meant to her came from Higgins, leaving us with the bigger question of spending priorities: “A good deal better value than Trident.”

## *Julia Ziemer is Executive Manager at Polis*

**@Julezzee**  
**#Cheltlifest**

[The BBC as market shaper and creator](#) – MPP Blog  
[BBC Charter Review blog series](#)– MPP  
[Life without the BBC](#)– BBC study  
[Economic Value of the BBC](#)– BBC study

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