

# Oxford Media Convention: Burnham on the future of media



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A lot of talk here from Secretary of State [Andy Burnham](#) onwards about the public and yet the citizen is strangely absent. [The Oxford Media Convention](#) is the media community drawing up its annual wishlist and airing its collective angsts. Burnham [warned](#) against a ‘fevered and inward looking debate’ but that is kind of what we got. His [speech](#) was expansive and hit various nails on the head but despite admitting that we are ‘only weeks away from hard decisions’ he refused to reveal what calls he is going to make regarding Ofcom and the public service broadcasting review. Burnham came out with some platitudes, of course, apparently ‘quality and standards matter’, which is a relief. His defence of pluralism was welcome but hardly controversial:

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‘plural programme provision provides range of voices that citizens need..crucially important in news and current affairs and underpins healthy democracy and local and national level..it increases choice and competition...sustains Britain’s reputation around the world’ He had a familiar litany of PSB content priorities:

1. High quality impartial news at local regional and national’ 
2. Childrens programming 
3. Drama
4. Current affairs and factual

I think that just leaves sport and comedy as not being priorities. In the light of current economic difficulties he warned that now was not the time for ‘expansionist’ reforms. I disagree with that, in the sense the the idea and practice of news, for example, is already expanding so we need to adjust our institutions accordingly. He seemed to recognise this in the key word of the speech, “partnership” which will become the DCMS mantra in the face of problems as diverse as international to local news.

He called for a new Reithian injunction for the BBC:

‘To put partnership into the BBC’s DNA – to educate, inform, entertain and enable” ‘To put partnership into the BBC’s DNA – to educate, inform, entertain and enable” He promised that the “Plight of local news has to rise up the political agenda...” but was unclear on how government might nudge local bodies to meet that challenge:

*‘State aid is antithetical to local newspapers but having said that there are ways that systems can be self-supporting – public bodies are looking to get involved – local councils looking to get involved – councils are putting lots of money into their own publications – we are hoping there will be a contestable and viable system’*

Channel 4 was reassured and it seems highly likely that the fix will be a partnership with BBC Worldwide albeit with a hint at other possibilities. But that will mean a “a new structure and a more specific remit” for Channel 4 which I

suspect will end up as a kind of innovation agency for PSB in the UK and a clearing house for independent production (C4 as the PSP anyone?)

Certainly the BBC is playing tough in its courtship of C4. Trust Chair Michael Lyons made a fascinating analogy between Lloyds bank and the BBC. Lloyds sees itself as the sensible bank that has collapsed under the weight of government manipulation in a crisis. It is clear that the BBC does not want to be used to pay off the other PSB's pending toxic debts.

Burnham said he was 'convinced' by Lyons' argument.

Go [here](#) to listen to podcasts and get transcripts of the Oxford Media Convention including audio of the panel I spoke on.



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