

# French Media Reform: Why They Need The Queen

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I tried to explain the [BBC Trust](#) to the population of France last night. Or at least, those who watched [my appearance](#) on TF2's news item about the reform of French TV. (The item is about 18 minutes in). It was bit like trying to explain the laws of cricket (or why the England coach and captain have both just resigned...)

My French does not extend far beyond ordering the house red, but France2 now appear to be crediting Her Majesty with the independence of the BBC. Let me explain.

It takes Ofcom and DCMS years to tweak the British Public Service Broadcasting system in an endless round of consultation and review papers. [President Sarkozy](#) moves faster.

He has [decided](#) to phase out advertising on France's PSB TV channels (at least after 8pm) and replace it with a levy on things like mobile phones. Now this is the kind of largesse that ITV and Channel 4 can only dream of, but in France the media *n'est pas content*.

They fear that the dosh from the levy will not match the revenue from 'le pub' or 'publicite' (advertising to you non-Francophones). So they've done what French workers do in these situations and gone on strike.

Sarkozy has an interesting agenda. He is mates with the boss of France's best-watched channel, the commercial TF1 which is a major beneficiary of the reforms.

## BRAZEN MANIPULATION

He has also given himself the power to appoint the bosses of the state-owned channels. This has evoked the dystopian vision of Berlusconi's brazen manipulation of the media in Italy.

The French look to the BBC as a paragon of independence and they wanted to know how the BBC Trust safeguards that status.

I tried to explain how the BBC Trust is a weird hybrid. Technically, it is [appointed by Her Majesty](#) although in practice it is the minister who does it through an 'independent' body:

*"BBC Trust members are appointed by the Queen on advice from ministers. Vacancies are advertised and appointments are made on merit, following a process regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, an independent body."*

So the BBC is in this odd position that Ofcom sets the regulatory framework for PSB in the UK but does not regulate the BBC. The BBC Trust is part of the BBC but it is also the representative of the licence-fee payer, and in a way, the Government's way of keeping an eye on overall policy.

A lot of BBC people don't like the arrangement. They think that the Trust is a block on initiative. It criticises and censures but it can't provide leadership.

## BRITISH FUDGE

On the other hand, people outside the BBC think that the Trust is much too cosy with the managers at the BBC. It's a classic British fudge.

At the moment, though, you don't get many complaints these days about Government interference in BBC policy. So perhaps it works in that respect. The politicians have the ultimate power because they approve the Charter, set the licence fee, and ultimately, they decide on the shape of broadcasting policy. But Andy Burnham is not Berlusconi.

## LEVY DREAMS

My message to the great people of France was that British media dreams of a levy to support broadcasting. Indeed, it was one of the solutions advocated at a [recent Polis debate](#) on the subject. But as I pointed out at the time, no politician in the UK is going to stand up and tell the British people that they are bringing in a tax on mobile phones or satellite TV to pay for public service broadcasting. It takes a French President to do that.

I also suggested that the Presidential patronage would not be such a bad thing as long as there were plenty of other checks and balances in place. And I think that's where they came up with the idea of the Queen...

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