

Ofcom throws down the gauntlet to the BBC: Ed Richards at Polis

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Ed Richards is the consummate policy wonk but at Polis tonight he allowed a little passion to surface. There was a definite sense that Britain's broadcasting regulator wants a bit more urgency injected into its [public service broadcasting review](#).

The target was the BBC. Not for the [Brand/Ross/Sachs farrago](#) but for its offering of 'partnership' to other broadcasters as an alternative to losing its own licence fee-funded income. But Richards wants the BBC to come clean. What exactly is the BBC proposing?:

"I don't know what the BBC proposals are – they haven't been developed yet. I hope they are very significant and will make a big difference. They need to be of scale, allow autonomy for the other broadcasters and to allow fair competition"

This is not because he has an agenda to undermine the BBC. He made it clear that he does not like the loose talk about 'top slicing the BBC's licence fee'. He sees no reason to extract money from the BBC's core programme budget. However, he sounded remarkably open to a partnership between Channel 4 and BBC Worldwide.

So what were his demands for a BBC offering of 'partnership' with other broadcasters? Well, these were the three tests he set for Auntie to meet:

1. Scale – it has to be a significant sharing
2. Autonomy -the other organisations have to retain their independence
3. Fairness – fair competition has to be retained

But whatever the BBC comes up with it has to be serious:

"Sticking plaster solutions will not work. Channel 4's problems are deep-seated and structural. This demands a serious response. I am not doing to duck this issue. I will be deeply embarrassed if this problem is not addressed on my watch."

There were lots of other interesting details as Ed Richards ranged across the broadcasting and broadband issues. Here's a few that struck me.

He is still attached to the idea of the 'public service provider', a concept that suffered greatly in its conception but has now acquired some renewed relevance:

"it was radical idea, an heretical idea in its time, but the core idea is with us now, the central insight has become mainstream. If you want to do public service broadcasting, you can't just do linear."

Nick Toon from Channel 4 rightly pointed out that their [C4iP](#) project is already taking PSB into that online distributed world where mainstream broadcasters match up with community and commercial Internet content providers. It's the kind of experiment that is testing the boundaries of where Ofcom works.

Ed Richards suggests that this post-linear world will offer the choice between a regulated broadcast world and a looser, less impartial set of broadcast or online offerings. The consumer will have a set of choices that will not always be supervised by Mr Richards and his chums at their south London offices.

I got the impression that Ed Richards is now a man in a hurry. He can sense that legislation is imminent and that it is time to cut to the chase. It is the moment for the major player (the BBC) to come clean with its offering as the various players in this poker game must declare their hands.

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