

# The Ofcom options: the best debate yet

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An interesting debate on [public service broadcasting reform](#) sounds as unlikely as an entertaining away victory for England's football team in Croatia tonight. But that's what happened at [Polis](#) today.

After month's of discussion and consultative events about their [review](#) of public service broadcasting, the arguments finally sprung to life thanks to four passionate and perceptive advocates of four very different options. The only problem is that [Ofcom](#) has probably already decided on the outcome. Next week's [RTS](#) speech by Ofcom boss Ed Richards promises to 'refine' the options but I am told that the deal is effectively done.

[Ofcom's](#) strategy boss Peter Philips said that the Polis-hosted event was "the most interesting and wide-ranging debate we've had".

Academic [Steven Barnett](#) made the case for a reform of the status quo. He warned that media history is littered with examples of calls for radical change that are best not heeded. He was sympathetic to the idea of a French-style industry levy to support PSB beyond the BBC, but felt it should go to institutions, not content.

[Heather Rabbatts](#) argued for the second option which is to leave all public service subsidy with the BBC and let it compete with the market. There will still be public service product elsewhere: places like Sky and the Internet already provide it without subsidy. This would leave the BBC as the main PSB with the scale and resources to innovate and become the UK's global public service provider. This solution, she argued, was the simplest and most durable. Let the market provide the diversity.

[All3media's Steve Morrison](#) made the case for option three which is the BBC and Channel 4 competitive funding model. He made the most fact-laden argument showing how much dosh could be raised if we imposed Continental-style levies. By creating small taxes on programme recording equipment or by charging broadcasters who run other producer's contents in their channel bundles, he totted up a grand total of around £500 million. Neither the companies or the consumer would feel the pain, he argued. "It's like the fuel surcharge on flights" he said. The music business does a similar thing with a levy on the public use of music. His case was beautifully researched. Unfortunately, it ain't going to happen.

[Sky's](#) David Wheelden claimed that levies like this are a disincentive to investment. And I simply can't see either a Labour or Tory DCMS Secretary of State standing up in the Commons to announce new taxes to fund media salaries. I am reliably informed that Ofcom have been through the idea with a fine toothcomb and dismissed it.

[David Elstein](#) was accused by Steven Barnett of trying to destroy the BBC with his fourth option, the competitive funding model. David didn't reject the idea of a levy outright. But his argument was not about where the money comes from, but how it should be handed out. He is in favour of a small Channel 4-style commissioning body that hands out funds for public service programming, not institutions.

Peter Philips of Ofcom made it clear that they are not about to choose one option. Their final recommendation will almost certainly be a combination. Personally, I don't think we should expect anything radical.

I notice that at our event the BBC were expressing their desire to partner with other PSB providers, which is, perhaps, their way of saying "please leave our fee alone". They recognise that the idea of 'top-slicing' the licence fee is by far the least painful and cost-free option.

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