The BBC Strategy Review: Directors UK responds

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Directors UK, the union of television and film directors gives its verdict on the BBC Strategy Review: public space means more than institutions and it fails to recognise the importance of the UK’s creative community

1. Directors UK is the voice of British screen directors, a collective rights management society and membership organisation representing the creative, economic and contractual interests of 4,000 members – virtually every established director in the UK, working in all genres of television and film. Directors UK promotes excellence in the craft of direction both nationally and internationally and works closely with fellow organisations in the UK, Europe and around the world to represent directors’ rights and concerns.

2. Directors UK welcomes the BBC Strategy Review and appreciates the opportunity to respond to it. We share with the BBC the belief that it is the single most important cultural institution in the UK. We are also particularly encouraged by the BBC’s articulation of the concept of ‘the public space’ and its role within it.

3. In particular we support the following aspirations of the Review: The BBC’s determination to put quality first and to redirect additional investment towards creative excellence and higher quality content. The commitment to devote a minimum of 80% of the licence fee to content creation, with an emphasis on original British work as against overseas programming. The commitment to reduce senior management numbers, freezing their pay and suspending bonuses. The resolve to preserve the BBC’s independence and impartiality.

However we have one major concern. The BBC’s definition of ‘the public space’.

4. Public space is not only occupied by institutions as the document suggests, but also by individuals and communities. This is not a semantic point. In UK television, the wider creative community upon which the BBC depends is made up almost exclusively of freelance individuals. This atomised workforce is a product of the decades-long growth of the independent production sector. Although a workforce so constructed may be a significant challenge for any management group, that is not a justification for ignoring its existence.

5. We searched the Strategy Review in vain for policies towards the UK’s creative community - despite the declaration that the BBC intends to operate ‘in a way that promotes the health of the wider media industry’ – we found none. We assert that the BBC will fail to achieve the stated goals of the Strategy Review if it does not engage with the creative community fully.

DIRECTORS AT THE BBC

6. Directors are central to the production process. Nothing that is transmitted, screened or viewed online would exist without the work of our members. The centrality of the directors’ position is recognised by law. In the 1996 Copyright Act directors were formally recognised as being co-authors, with the producer or production company, of their work.
7. As the largest single employer of directors working in the UK, the BBC is certainly aware of the fundamental importance of their role in the successful production of quality programmes. Yet, for too long directors have suffered an erosion of their pay, working conditions, creative independence and status. This erosion coincided with what is generally acknowledged as a period of deterioration in creative standards across the industry. We believe that these two processes are closely linked.

8. The industry-wide undermining of the director’s role has had financial consequences for management as well. Directors, alongside producers, are essential partners in extracting value from any available resource. Part managers and part creators, they are the central link between management and the other creative roles. In addition to bringing an overall vision to the screen, they continually look for ways to do more with less. Directors are the BBC’s natural partners in its quest to improve quality, create distinctiveness and manage costs.

9. We are pleased the BBC has committed itself to promoting the general health of the wider TV industry and believe that through this process of Review it now has an excellent opportunity to reverse the decline in the status of directors. This will bring it significant creative and economic rewards.

**BUDGET CUTS AND MANAGEMENT CULTURE**

10. Directors working at the BBC have become accustomed to the ‘not enough/less money’ argument. They have responded with resourcefulness but the cost, both artistic and personal, has been considerable. Morale is low, training opportunities are few, incomes have been reduced (especially for freelance directors upon whom the BBC fundamentally depends), production resources cut back, schedules remorselessly shortened, and fewer production staff employed.

11. In addition, while the BBC’s creative teams have been whittled down to the bare minimum in recent years, there has been a corresponding increase in red-tape as the BBC’s compliance culture has expanded – especially in factual production. This adds considerably to the burdens our members carry while doing little to improve the quality of their work.

12. It is ironic that while the BBC management has grown in size, become more centralised and taken power away from programme-makers to make creative decisions, it has imposed this extra workload. It is as though senior managers have lost confidence in their creative teams and have turned to checklists and box ticking to safe guard them from any potential criticism.

13. We note the Review’s brief acknowledgment of the need to reduce ‘the volume of activity’ in the compliance area but suspect that this intention is motivated more by cost than a recognition of the debilitating nature of this ‘activity’. We would support a move to more effective management, better training of staff, alongside a return of trust and belief by management in their workforce.

14. Continual production budget cuts are the real cause of the problem. Despite the growth of Health & Safety regulation within the BBC (particularly in the factual area) we know of extreme cases where directors and their production teams are working very long hours - in some cases even 36 hours in a 48 hour period - in order to deliver programmes to a reasonable standard. The H&S culture has done nothing to change this.

15. These realities have fed the frustration and anger felt across all production grades at what is seen as a dogmatic culture of year-on-year cuts while ever-increasing sums have been spent on non-core investments and management. There is a real danger that the BBC, and the wider industry, will suffer further defections of production talent as exasperated programme makers look elsewhere for stimulating and rewarding careers.

**QUALITY AND DISTINCTIVENESS**

16. Truly original programming depends on broadcasters taking risks and empowering creative originators - writers, producers and directors. If the BBC wants to create ‘fresh and new ideas’ it must have the courage to support creative innovation. This is not vague idealism. From the BBC’s
own research it is clear that the BBC audience is weary of the old, and willing to embrace the new if it is delivered with quality. Bolder, better resourced programmes would attract bigger audiences, more critical approval and be internationally saleable assets. All of this would help to keep the Corporation at the creative heart of British culture.

17. To do this effectively would require a substantial re-organisation of the BBC’s commissioning structure. Currently, commissioning is over-centralised, giving far too much power to too few arbiters. This is not only cumbersome and disincentivising, it is also prone to generate favourites and, reputedly, black lists. For the BBC to release the energy of the creative community, it must widen the commissioning pool and push power back down the chain of programme-making.

DIRECTORS AS PARTNERS

18. We believe that if the BBC is to achieve higher artistic standards while resources remain under pressure, it must seek a new engagement with the UK’s creative community in general, and with directors in particular. This will require a new and genuine ‘Partnership’ beyond anything proposed in the Strategy Review.

19. Directors UK will support the BBC Trust and BBC Management if they decide to confront these issues head on and move investment back towards new, original programmes, including non formulaic drama, edgy comedy and authored documentaries, while providing programme makers with the resources and the creative space necessary to deliver them at the highest level.

20. Directors as a community are the natural ally of the BBC. We share the same desire to produce the very finest programmes possible within the available resources.

INVESTMENT IN FILM

21. Feature films are a critically important part of the nation’s ‘public space’ and the British film industry is an internationally significant cultural force. We are surprised that the subject of feature films has been so completely left out of the Strategy Review.

22. The BBC has expressed a commitment to being ‘a creator of content in areas most at risk of being ignored or under-invested in by commercial players’. British independent film is just such an area, desperately short of investment due to a reduced UKFC budget, the new UK tax credit which makes co-production difficult, and the closing of US studios’ ‘classic divisions’ which had been co-investors. There is a chance here for the BBC to create unique content while fully meeting any Public Service obligations to film as culture.

23. DCMS research from 2005 suggests that some of the most appreciated programmes on the BBC were British made feature films, yet the proportion of the BBC licence fee invested in UK feature film (£12m) is a mere 0.3% of the BBC’s annual turnover. This tiny sum is totally out of proportion to the prestige such projects can bring to the Corporation.

24. Directors UK urges the BBC to increase its investment in British feature films substantially, doubling it at the very least. This would significantly reinforce Britain’s film culture and create quality content that the Corporation can exploit internationally. To quote the Strategy Review, it would ensure ‘an uninterrupted flow of investment into high quality content and into the development and success of the best British talent’.

25. Channel Four has recently shown the way by making a new commitment to investment in film production, and demonstrated a sharpening of its Public Service remit in this respect. We urge the BBC to follow suit.

CONTRACTUAL MATTERS

26. Directors UK and the BBC have spent the last two years in constructive discussions on a variety
of issues, including a new Joint Statement on Creative Rights and Responsibilities (In-House Drama). We are also embarking on discussions for a similar document for factual production. If properly implemented, these documents could be a first, positive, step towards correcting the historical erosion of the director’s status at the BBC and building the new partnership with directors.

ACCESS TO CONTENT

27. Directors UK strongly supports the BBC’s commitment to allow greater access to content with all the opportunities that offers. However Directors UK is determined to see appropriate remuneration for directors, as authors, for the secondary use of their work.

IN CONCLUSION

We celebrate the BBC’s renewed commitment to quality programming, to increasing programme budgets, and to reducing management costs.

We call on the BBC immediately to reverse its 5% annual cut in production expenditure and move swiftly to increase spending on its core activity – the making of quality programmes.

We call for a wholesale shift of creative decision-making power from senior management down the chain towards producers and directors.

Directors are by definition problem solvers and are prepared to shoulder more responsibility if their concerns are recognised and they are offered new creative opportunities. We ask the BBC to place directors at the heart of the BBC’s new partnership strategy.

We salute the BBC’s intention to be ‘the most open and responsive creative institution in the UK’, with ‘partnership’ as its ‘default setting’, yet we fear that the BBC still has a long way to go in recognising the deterioration in creative and working conditions for its production staff. We trust it will now embrace this challenge.

Directors UK, acting on behalf of its members, stands ready to work in partnership with the BBC for the health of the wider industry and to assist the BBC in achieving its goal of putting quality first.

Country or region: UK
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