

Britain's Next Chapter: BBC Royal Charter Review Green Paper: Call for Evidence

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Submitted by:

The Sandford St Martin Trust (Registered charity no. 277370)

Room 101, Church House

Great Smith Street

London SW1P 3AZ

Chair: **Dr Tony Stoller CBE**

Executive Director: **Anna McNamee**

About the Sandford St Martin Trust

- i. The Sandford St Martin Trust (SSMT) promotes thought-provoking, distinctive broadcasting that engages with belief and enhances the public understanding of religion. We believe the media have an increasingly important and challenging role to play in interpreting world events and that this cannot be done without acknowledging the complex roles religions play in both contemporary and historical human experience. Religiously literate media can promote greater understanding, increase tolerance, and foster stronger communities and cooperation at local, national and global levels.
- ii. SSMT advocates at industry, regulatory and government levels for the place of broadcasting about religion in a healthy and diverse media ecosystem. Our outreach work promotes religion as an important and rewarding subject for both content-makers and audiences. In recent years, we have produced events in partnership with the Wales Screen Summit, the Bradford Literature Festival, the Commission for Belief in Public Life, the Edinburgh International Television Festival, the Media Society, NUJ Training, Sheffield Doc/Fest and many more. More details can be found on our website: www.sandfordawards.org.uk
- iii. In addition to our campaigning and advocacy work, SSMT has made annual awards for the best broadcast and, more recently, online video and audio content about belief, religion, ethics and spirituality since 1978. The SSM Awards are the UK's most prestigious prize for religious broadcasting and are open to a wide range of genres – news, current affairs factual, arts, music, drama and comedy - as well as to 'traditional' religious broadcasting. Winners are decided by panels of media professionals. *Radio Times* readers also vote in their thousands for their favourite TV or radio programme exploring religion from a list published in that magazine.
- iv. SSMT is politically independent and is not affiliated with any media company or organisation. It does not proselytise on behalf of or promote any religion or faith, nor does it engage in religious activities itself. Our Trustees include people with many years' experience of production and broadcasting who represent a wide variety of perspectives and faith backgrounds.

- v. In the context of rapid changes in how the audience consume media, and in the industries that serve these evolving demands, SSMT considers this Charter Review to be of major public significance. It offers an opportunity to shape not only the future direction of the BBC, but also the ways in which future generations across the UK understand themselves and their relationships to their local and national communities as well as to the wider world.
- vi. Given its extensive reach and its Reithian heritage, SSMT believes the BBC should play a central role in shaping the future of the UK's digital media landscape. This submission argues that this role should remain grounded in the broadcaster's longstanding commitment to public service, including the promotion of religious literacy as an essential civic competency.

Purpose

- vii. SSMT believes the BBC's core mission - "to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain" - should be updated to better reflect and respond to the challenges in the contemporary media landscape. In particular, we recommend that any new Charter should give the BBC a clearer mandate to address misinformation and disinformation, and to strengthen the public understanding of religion and belief and the role they play in human experiences and events.
- viii. Traditionally audiences have been able to depend on the BBC for the provision of religiously literate and unbiased coverage of how belief impacts human events. Against a background where trust in the media is in decline¹ and growing concerns that false or misleading narratives can shape behaviour in ways that carry economic, political and social consequences², we believe the BBC should lead an ambitious civic religious literacy programme across all its platforms.

Future of Public Service Media

- ix. Religious broadcasting in the UK has experienced a dramatic decline, with original content on religion and ethics having fallen by 85% at peak times between 2011 and 2022. The BBC is currently the primary provider of religious programming in the UK, accounting for 99 % of all religious content broadcasters in 2022.³
- x. However, feedback from SSMT stakeholders suggests that many people from UK faith communities feel that at best the BBC does not fully or accurately reflect their experiences, and, at worst, they believe the BBC is religiously illiterate⁴. While, for the most part, SSMT does not agree with either characterisation, the prevalence of such opinions among key stakeholders demonstrates the need for the BBC to put religion at the heart of its public service remit and to make its content about religion more prominent and accessible to audiences.

¹ https://www.edelman.co.uk/sites/g/files/aatuss301/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_UK%20Report.pdf
<https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/trust-in-media-uk-edelman-barometer-2024/>

² <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/disinformation-and-its-effects-on-society/>

³ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/public-service-broadcasting/annual-report-2022>

⁴ <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/rmc-briefings/bbc-charter-review-and-the-future-of-religious-broadcasting/>

- xi. Recent research conducted by the University of Leeds in cooperation with SSMT revealed serious shortcomings in how the UK’s public service broadcasters – including the BBC – present genres such as religion and belief on their streaming platforms. It found content focused on religion is largely excluded from streaming homepages, is rarely recommended, and can be difficult to find. Further, the BBC’s iPlayer algorithm was shown to seldom highlight this genre unless users had already engaged with similar material.⁵
- xii. Among the recommendations the report made were a series of urgent recommendations aimed at restoring the values of public service broadcasting in the digital age including government incentivisation to promote socially significant programming which is “essential for building understanding and empathy in a diverse society”⁶.
- xiii. Recent years have seen a revolution in the media landscape. More people now consume news online than through TV, radio or newspapers⁷; for 16–24-year-olds social media is the main way to access news⁸; for children born since 2010, YouTube is their preferred media platform⁹. In response, the BBC has increased its presence on third-party platforms including YouTube and TikTok. SSMT believes that if the BBC is going to effectively to deliver on its public service mission in this ever-expanding media-sphere, then it is critical that its role is more than just a “content provider”.
- xiv. We have noted that the recent DCMS public consultation asked whether the BBC should make “greater use of third-party platforms”¹⁰. While SSMT has no objections to the BBC’s greater use of these platforms to provide audiences with high-quality religious content and programming about religion and belief, we would urge that the relationship between the BBC and these platforms and social media is carefully negotiated and is subject to regulation.
- xv. Third-party platforms are major sites for the spread of misinformation. This is especially true in relation to religion and belief, where stereotypes, misunderstandings and misleading narratives can circulate widely. SSMT believes that the BBC’s presence on these platforms can help counter misinformation by providing trusted, accurate and well-contextualised content. **However**, it is also noted that these platforms exercise their own systems of editorialising using algorithms. If its presence on these platforms is to remain true to the BBC’s public service mission, then SSMT believes there needs to be further research and work done on how the BBC can most meaningfully engage in the digital public sphere and what rules and regulation (if any) should be applied.
- xvi. SSMT believes the BBC is well placed to develop religiously literacy initiatives. Early BBC pilots such as the live [@bbcquestiontime](#) Twitter feed proved an effective way of engaging a diverse audience in civic discourse.¹¹ SSMT would like to see this model applied to religious programming. For example: *Songs of Praise* or any of Gareth Malone’s choir programmes could include a digital space for people could to submit questions linked to religious texts or to upload their own musical performances; *Celebration Kitchen* or *Christmas with (...)* could partner with organised faith-communities to provide a moderated space where questions can be answered, recipes could be shared or stories and experience shared. *Question Time*’s previous success on Twitter could be revamped for the current

⁵ <https://sandfordawards.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Behind-the-Screen-Final.pdf>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/attitudes-to-news/top-trends-from-our-latest-look-at-the-uks-news-habits>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jul/30/youtube-tv-destination-children-ofcom-survey>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/britains-story-the-next-chapter-the-bbc-royal-charter-review-green-paper-and-public-consultation>

¹¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1940161211415519>

media sphere to include digital “townhalls” where member of the public could discuss ethical or issues of interest to a religious audience arising during the studio programme.¹²

- xvii. Projects such as *Share Take Care*, *News School Report* and *The Listening Project* have helped audiences – especially younger people – better understand how media content is created and presented. Expanding such initiatives could enable audiences to engage more thoughtfully with coverage of faith communities and religious issues, while also supporting greater understanding of religions and belief.

Trust and relevance

- xviii. Religiously literate broadcasting and media provision are vital in a diverse society. They support accurate journalism and help audiences understand the role faith plays in everyday life and global affairs; it encourages informed and respectful public discourse.
- xix. To strengthen its value and trust among audiences across the UK, the BBC should reinforce its role as an independent, principled public service broadcaster, while ensuring its output reflects the full complexity of contemporary society.
- xx. A central priority is the consistent inclusion of religiously literate content across genres—from news and current affairs to drama and education—so that religion and belief are portrayed with accuracy, nuance, and relevance to public life. This should be supported by stronger internal expertise and governance arrangements that recognise the importance of religion and belief as part of the UK’s civic landscape.
- xxi. Trust also depends heavily on visible and credible independence. Safeguards should be strengthened to protect the BBC from political influence, particularly in relation to funding, governance, and editorial decision-making. Measures such as an independent funding commission, longer-term funding settlements, and extended Charter periods would help reduce exposure to short-term political pressures and enable sustained investment in specialist journalism and programming.
- xxii. Greater transparency and accountability are also essential. Clearer processes around editorial standards, scrutiny of any alleged interference, and more open governance structures would help maintain public confidence. At the same time, programme-makers should be supported in exercising editorial freedom, allowing them to develop thoughtful and representative content without undue constraint.
- xxiii. SSMT believes that in addition to the new digital engagement projects proposed earlier in this submission, the BBC should deepen its engagement with the public by creating structured mechanisms—such as a representative Citizens’ Assembly—to ensure a wider range of voices, including those from diverse religious and belief backgrounds, can inform its direction. Together, these steps would help ensure the BBC remains both widely valued and broadly trusted in a changing media environment.

¹² This draws on Tony Curzon Price’s “Common Ground” proposal for addressing “where could existing BBC products be give some social media shaping attributes” <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/how-can-governments-effectively-regulate-social-media-for-the-public-good/>

Conclusion

- xxiv. Maintaining trust and relevance in a rapidly evolving media environment requires a clear and renewed sense of purpose. SSMT believes to remain a trusted national institution, the BBC must reaffirm its commitment to religious literacy as a central component of its public service role. This includes ensuring that religion and belief are represented with accuracy, nuance, and prominence across both traditional and digital platforms, and that such content is accessible and visible within increasingly algorithm-driven media environments. At a time when religious broadcasting has declined across the sector, the BBC is uniquely positioned—and carries a corresponding responsibility—to lead in this area.
- xxv. At the same time, we believe the BBC's future effectiveness will depend on its ability to operate with clear independence, supported by robust funding, transparent governance, and protections for editorial freedom. Strengthening its role in the digital public sphere—whether through responsible engagement with third-party platforms or through innovative audience participation initiatives—will also be essential if it is to reach younger and more diverse audiences.
- xxvi. Taken together, these measures point to a BBC that is not only a content provider, but a civic institution: one that informs, educates, and connects audiences, while fostering greater understanding and social cohesion. By aligning its purpose, structures, and output with these goals, the BBC can continue to command public trust and remain relevant to audiences across the UK in the years ahead.