

Partnership Proposals from the BBC Executive: The BBC Trust's approach to evaluation

In June 2008 the BBC Trust challenged the BBC Executive to develop a range of potential partnerships designed to build value for public service broadcasting in the UK. The Trust believes the BBC has a real role to play in delivering innovative solutions to the problems facing PSB.

This challenge was to develop sustainable partnership proposals, leveraging the cornerstone role played by the BBC in broadcasting to deliver potential benefits to the commercial PSBs and wider broadcasting sector whilst at the same time not diminishing the service to audiences provided by the BBC.

The reason underlying this challenge was to develop a long-term, strategic solution to the problems facing PSB, based on the strengths of particular institutions, which are highly valued by audiences. Far from the idea of a BBC bearing gifts, looking for opportunities to work ever more closely in partnership with other broadcasters must represent a genuine shift in attitude. It also represents a significant opportunity to better deliver the public purposes and so deliver even great public value to audiences.

The Executive has responded to these challenges in their document published today.

The Trust welcomes these proposals. They offer the prospect of making a meaningful contribution to the future of public service broadcasting in the UK. The key partnerships proposals include:

- Sharing BBC iPlayer
- IPTV
- Supporting broadband take-up
- Supporting DAB
- Sharing digital production technology with all other broadcasters
- Sharing regional news facilities
- Commercial deals involving BBC Worldwide
- Plus sharing research

At the time of the first phase of Ofcom's PSB review, the Trust undertook to publish any partnership proposals it received and to seek the views of industry, stakeholders and licence fee payers. We are now doing so and are particularly interested in the views of potential and actual partners. We would be interested in general comments about the proposals as a whole and will be open to views for the next three months. Due to the nature of the partnership discussions, many of which are commercially sensitive, there is a limit to the information we can make public at present. However, the Trust will publish more detail when and where possible.

Most of the partnership proposals will be subject to the general approval of the Trust under its existing protocols. The Trust will evaluate them against the following questions:

- Do the proposals really make a difference and produce a sustainable outcome?
- Do they offer demonstrable value to prospective partners and other stakeholders?
- Do they represent a genuine offer, not excluding options which may involve a financial cost to the BBC – if that cost can be justified by public gain?
- Can the Trust be sure that the principles of independence, accountability and delivery of the public purposes are not put at risk?
- Are these proposals ones which the Trust judges to be in the public interest?

Within these questions the Trust has two points it will pay particular attention to:

1. Making sure partnerships deliver benefits for audiences

The key issue for the Trust will also be how the proposals strike the right balance around delivering benefits to audiences, public service broadcasters and any impact on the wider broadcasting sector. In particular the Trust will pay particular attention to the scope to open certain initiatives to a much wider number of broadcasters and other media providers.

We will seek to act in co-operation with Ofcom who have the necessary powers to licence commercial PSBs and also to decide whether those broadcasters have the necessary funding for their commitments.

2. Partnership as a sustainable model

Subject to the outcome of any representations and subsequent regulatory processes, progress on partnerships by the Executive and the flow of benefits will be considered by the Trust as a quarterly item and in addition the Trust will publish its views on overall progress in its annual report. In addition, the Trust remains open to further proposals from the Executive for other potential partnerships.

There are also two specific aspects of the proposals where the Trust intends to use its wider regulatory powers: the decision to open the iPlayer service to other broadcasters (where the Trust will consider whether a Public Value Test should be applied) and the development of IPTV which the Trust considers requires a “non-service” approval process under the BBC Agreement.

Timetable for consideration

The following administrative timetable is designed to give a broad indication of when the main issues could be considered by the Trust. This is purely for indication and without prejudice to the Trust’s exercise of its regulatory responsibilities.

- December – non-service approval process for IPTV commences with consultation from early in the new year.
- December – February 2009 – Trust open to representations on partnership proposals as a whole.
- Spring 2009 – Possible PVT launch for iPlayer sharing.
- Summer 2009 – non-service decision for IPTV.
- Autumn 2009 – PVT decision for iPlayer sharing.

Next steps

You can read find out more about the Executive's partnership proposals at bbc.co.uk/thefuture. You can send your comments to the Trust at: partnership_proposals@bbc.co.uk or write to the Trust at: BBC Trust, 35 Marylebone High Street, London W1U 4AA.

BBC Trust
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