

Speech by Tony Hall, Director-General of the BBC

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Introduction

It's a pleasure to be here today.

I'm always glad to be back in Birmingham. In fact, my very first visit as Director-General of the BBC was to our headquarters here, The Mailbox.

I'll always remember it, because it was just after Baroness Thatcher had died, and my welcome back to the corporation was someone taking me aside to tell me that the song that was heading to the top of our official music charts was "Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead".

It's the kind of thing that only happens at the BBC – or maybe in *W1A*.

But the other thing I really remember about that visit was being shocked that the place was half empty – or rather half full.

Yes, we had our news teams, the daytime drama village, *The Archers*, the Asian Network – all doing great things... But I was determined that the BBC could do so much more for the Midlands.

A few years on, The Mailbox is jam-packed – over 700 people.

It's the centre for skills and development for the whole of the BBC, home of HR and our Academy. And it's a vital hub for youth and digital innovation in the corporation.

Overall, half of the BBC's people are now out of London, along with half of our production spend.

And what we've done here and in Manchester – in our creative hubs in Cardiff and Glasgow, Belfast and Bristol – has shown just what an impact the BBC can have as a catalyst for boosting a region's economy and creativity, jobs and skills, ambition and opportunity.

It's the kind of difference only a really bold, public service intervention can make. And this is one of the things I'm going to focus on today.

Because what I want to talk about is public service... Its values, its place in society, its importance right now.

Like so many of you, it's where I have spent my whole career:

At the BBC or running the Royal Opera House... During my time on the boards of Channel 4 or the London 2012 organising committee...

...As chair of Creative and Cultural Skills, giving young people opportunities in the creative industries, or chairing the Theatre Royal Stratford East – Joan Littlewood's old theatre.

During this time, I have so often come across the assumption that the commercial sector is somehow better; by definition more efficient or effective.

I know – all of you know, whatever your background – that this is far from the case...

...That the public and private sectors have always had a great deal to learn from each other... That everyone benefits from a flow of ideas and best practice that goes both ways.

But I do think that, today – in an uncertain, fast-changing world – the principles and ideals that underpin public service have become increasingly important and valuable...

...And I believe that now is a moment we need to stand up for and champion them more than ever before.

Shared public service ideals

I remember, just as I was leaving BBC News for the Opera House, I was asked to speak on a platform by the economist, Will Hutton.

We talked afterwards about why he wanted someone from my background on a panel alongside so many from the private sector.

He said he wanted me to demonstrate the complexity of the world in which we have to deliver public value, against very public scrutiny – much more complex, he said, than for those others.

It made me think: What is that makes us want to work in such hugely complex environments?

I have to say, it was a question I asked myself more than once walking into the Opera House at a time of real chaos.

But despite all the difficulties, what I discovered right away was so many brilliant, passionate people, still getting on and doing great things.

It was the same when I went back to the BBC. It was in the wake of the Savile crisis, but nonetheless the dedication of our staff was incredible.

In the staff surveys, the proportion of people saying they believed in the BBC and were proud to work there was off the charts.

They had come to us because they believed in something. They were motivated a clear sense of purpose, united by common ideals.

So what are these public service ideals?

Let me have an attempt at what I think they are...

1. Serving everyone with quality

The first is a very democratic one: we are here to serve everyone – whoever, wherever. And to serve them with quality, with the very best.

This has been my driving motivation throughout my career.

It's why, when I arrived at the Opera House, I was determined to bring in new and different audiences and make sure opera was for everyone.

So we had students coming for a tenner, and deals with the tabloids to get new people through the doors...

When I first started talking about it, it's fair to say it got a mixed reception... I remember *The Telegraph* reporting that: 'The Royal Opera House has now seen fit to launch (in inverted commas) "an app"'.

But then, we linked up with *The Sun* to get first timers to come along, and it was a great story... The opera was Don Giovanni, and they ran the headline: "Well Don, my son" ...

Of course, universality is a principle that has been enshrined in BBC from the start.

Nowhere is it more obvious, perhaps, than in news.

In a democracy, providing impartial and accurate news – that everyone can rely on – is an essential public service.

It's the BBC's first public purpose. And today we remain not only by far the most trusted source of news in the country, but one of the most trusted worldwide.

The new media age, with all its competing sources of information, has not diminished the importance of this role...

...Just the opposite: at a time when trust is at such a premium and information is so contested, the need for an impartial and accurate BBC is greater than ever.

But our commitment to universality goes far beyond news. 'The best for everyone' defines everything we do – making sure everyone can access great art, great music, great drama...

In this country, great culture is our birth-right. And it's the BBC's responsibility to make sure everyone benefits.

2. Representing everyone

Of course, it's not enough just to serve everyone. We need to represent everyone too – to give voice to as many different people and opinions as possible.

I was speaking to someone from the US recently, who told me: just follow Trump on Twitter for a day, and watch only Fox News, and see the kind of world it feels like we're in.

Today it's so tempting to choose news to suit our views. It's so easy to follow or listen only to those who reinforce what we already believe.

I believe it's the role of the BBC to stand for just the opposite: For broadening perspectives.

Of course that means challenging people's viewpoints. And the irony is that, the better we do it, the more open we are to accusations of bias from all sides.

I can tell you that no one agonises over impartiality like we do. And no one does more to ensure that all perspectives are heard.

Today the UK is increasingly diverse and devolved, and it feels increasingly fragmented... So we are working harder than ever to dig deep into *all* our communities.

One of the big things we're doing is investing in our network of local radio stations...

I've had the opportunity to visit virtually them all in the past few years, and what strikes me is how they are so often part of what actually defines our communities, gives them their sense of identity.

Listen to BBC West Midlands, for example, and you really start to understand what an extraordinarily diverse and young city Birmingham is – one of the youngest in Europe, with around a third under 20.

Or try BBC Sheffield and discover a part of the UK that – who knew? – is passionate about speedway and country music...

Our principle is to make sure station editors have more creative freedom to celebrate local life, reflect local identity, and nurture local talent.

It has already thrown up a few surprises, like BBC Sheffield's Naked Podcast – or as the presenters call themselves: “besties in the buff”.

The Prince of Wales talked a few weeks ago about why local journalism is so important: because it's so often what communities trust and rely on the most.

That's why we're working in partnership with regional newspapers and the local media sector more widely to support a new network of local democracy reporters...

...150 journalists – managed by local media, funded by the BBC – holding local politicians and public institutions to account across the UK.

The same principle applies to what we're doing in our nations.

We're launching a brand new channel in Scotland, with a special news hour blending Scottish and UK coverage.

In Wales we're focusing new investment on BBC One and iPlayer, and we're strengthening our mobile services... And in Northern Ireland, we're working on an online news service with enhanced news coverage right across the week.

But I think we need to go further.

Beyond news, beyond local media that speaks directly to local communities, people like to see where they live represented on air, to the whole country.

This year we've had programmes like *Shetland* from Scotland, *Keeping Faith* from Wales, and *Come Home* from Northern Ireland – or *Peaky Blinders* here in Birmingham – world-class storytelling with unmistakable national or regional identities.

Of course, representing the whole of the UK doesn't only mean celebrating what sets our communities apart. It also means celebrating what unites us as a country.

We've seen some incredible examples of that in the past few weeks.

The Royal Wedding was an unmissable TV event that had viewers transfixed across the country...

...And the BBC's Biggest Weekend over the bank holiday was an incredible celebration of live music across four nations. It reached over 15 million people on TV – 1-in-4 of the population.

3. Supporting education

But at the heart of our goal to bring the country together and reflect it to itself is a third shared ideal: And that's education.

It's the BBC's founding mission to inform, educate, and entertain – Lord Reith's idea that's as important and relevant today as it was almost 100 years ago, and arguably much more so.

There's occasionally a perception that the education part is somehow about sitting people down like a kind of Victorian schoolmaster and telling them what's good for them.

In fact, it's about TV like *Blue Planet II* – incredible, world-leading shows that push the boundaries of knowledge as well as programme-making...

...That do such an incredible job to inspire young people, and help change *all* of our perceptions of the world...

...That actually managed to move the needle in the debate on plastics – literally helping to bring about a sea change.

It's telling that so many of the BBC's award-winning shows this year have been those that take on important issues for society.

Programmes like *Hospital* and *Ambulance* – filmed here in the West Midlands – have opened up new perspectives on a question that could not be closer to the nation's heart: the state of the NHS.

And the impact that great quality TV can have on the national conversation was really brought home to me by something Rio Ferdinand said recently...

...He said that, since his extraordinary documentary – *Being Mum and Dad* – people now come up to him the street not to talk about football, but about grief and mental health.

It's not just through documentary that we can have a real impact. It's through the whole breadth of our output.

Dramas like the incredibly powerful *Three Girls*, which dealt with the true stories of victims of grooming and sexual violence in Rochdale, play a really important role in giving voice to those who might not otherwise be heard.

Within days, more than 300,000 people had signed a petition for Sara Rowbotham – played brilliantly by Maxine Peake – to be recognised for her role in bringing the terrible scandal to light.

In comedy, shows from *This Country* to *Famalam* do a huge amount to shine a light on modern British society – to challenge, as well as laugh at, ourselves.

Then there's programming that is designed specifically to benefit certain audiences, like our children's TV...

...The BBC is still the most watched and most loved for UK children – not to mention the most trusted for UK parents.

And support for children is not just about our creative output.

BBC Bitesize is our free, online study resource, designed to help school-aged students across the country prepare for schoolwork and exams.

It's used by nearly half of primary school students each term, and 8 out of 10 of those in secondary school... And more than half of them say it's helped them achieve better grades.

We also want to do more to help invest in the skills young people – and the country – need in the digital age.

That's why a couple of years ago we brought together more than 30 partners, from Barclays to Microsoft to ARM, to create the BBC micro:bit – a coding device that we gave to every 11-12 year old in the country.

Most recently we have been working to help young people distinguish real from fake news, and filter out false information.

Up to 1,000 schools around the country are now being offered mentoring from expert BBC journalists...

...And all schools can access free online materials, classroom activities, and our iReporter app – which lets 11-18 year olds experience the decision-making pressures of being a BBC journalist in the heart of the newsroom, and understand what makes news trustworthy.

4. Public service as ringmaster

But the BBC's contribution to society is not limited to what we can achieve through our content and services.

I'm a passionate believer in the impact we can have through our convening power... By acting as a ringmaster, if you like.

It's another public service ideal: bringing partners together and making things happen that would otherwise not be possible.

I remember being in Hull last year, where the BBC was playing its part in the fantastic City of Culture year...

I was speaking to Councillor Stephen Brady, Leader of the Council, and he said he'd learned that culture is not simply about art... It's about jobs and prosperity, looking out into the world with confidence and pride.

I'm really proud of what the BBC was able to do to help showcase Hull's cultural wealth to the nation and encourage everyone to take a fresh look at everything the city has to offer.

We had hundreds of hours of programming across all our channels... We made Hull host everything from Radio 1's Big Weekend, to the *Today* programme, to the first Prom outside London in over 80 years.

We even, quite literally, put the Hull on the map when we made it a permanent feature of our weather forecast – and the incredible response we had showed just how much the small things can really matter.

In short, we did everything we could to help promote the city at home and also abroad, with our programmes on BBC News and BBC World reaching around 10 million viewers worldwide.

I don't believe that anyone but us – with our unique local, national and global reach, and our unique public service mission – could have done that job.

And we'll do it again for Coventry, just down the road, as it becomes UK City of Culture in 2021.

I remember taking a taxi through the city at the time when they were waiting to hear if their bid was successful... It was a 2Tone Taxi – what else would you expect in Coventry?

I'm not sure the driver took the most direct route, but he certainly gave me a pretty comprehensive idea of everything the city has to offer, and I have to say I'm hugely excited about helping to take that to the widest possible audience.

But there's something else the BBC can do to help support the UK's cities and regions; something really significant that I touched on right at the start.

It's what we've done in Manchester, when we made a really bold decision to move some of our major operations to Salford Quays.

So many people were sceptical about the idea of creating a new media village... But the BBC acting as anchor not only meant that other media organisations were attracted to join us...

...It also meant that, within just a few years, our activities in the north were worth more than 275 million pounds each year to the UK economy, not to mention more jobs, training and skills for the region.

We're doing it again in Cardiff... In April I was there to see BBC Cymru Wales handed the keys to our new broadcast centre in Central Square.

It's a move that's triggered the biggest urban regeneration project in Wales. And it's on track to deliver a 1.1 billion pound economic boost and help create nearly 2,000 additional jobs over a ten year period.

These are the kind of big, bold interventions I'm most proud of – bringing other people on board, creating new excitement and new opportunities, acting as a powerful catalyst for our creative industries.

And by the way it's something I was also able to do at the Royal Opera House...

I remember, when the Olympic Park was being developed in the run up to London 2012, we needed to find a new home for our backstage production centre.

I wanted to get others on board and make it a centre for production and backstage skills, not just for the opera house but for the entire country.

The site we chose was a desperately run-down site in Thurrock, in the Thames Gateway. Not much more than a collection of collapsed barns and vandalised farm buildings, covered in brambles and rubbish...

Anyone who knows the area understands that, back then, the idea of it having any kind of connection to ballet and opera in Covent Garden was completely unthinkable. It might as well have been the surface of the moon.

Yet today it is the home of *Creative and Cultural Skills* – a national skills academy, capable of underpinning the UK's world-class creative industries – with the Opera House's backstage centre as anchor tenant.

And, I can tell you, I've never been prouder than when I saw the council tax leaflet go out with the message: "Thurrock – Home to the Royal Opera House".

5. Living our values

This brings me to the fifth and final ideal I want to pick out today: living our values.

It's particularly important at the BBC. Because of the way we are funded, we are always under intense scrutiny. We are always held – quite rightly – to a higher standard.

Gender pay and equality is an obvious example. It's an area where all of us have important issues to tackle.

At the BBC, we know it's not enough to say that our gender pay gap is narrower than most other organisations. We need to be an exemplar; right at the forefront of the change we want to see.

That's why I have committed to closing the gender pay gap by 2020 – something that no other large organisation has done. And I've committed to an equal split of men and women across our airwaves by the same year.

We've been working really hard towards these goals.

In particular we have been looking at what more we can do to change our culture and support the progression of women throughout the BBC – to make sure more women can progress more quickly.

In fact, we have launched four new initiatives on culture and progression more widely. As well as gender, we are focusing on ethnic minorities, disabled staff, and social mobility.

If you were to ask me about the one thing I want to crack, as soon as possible, it's getting more female and BAME representation in our senior management – right at the top of the organisation.

And as someone who grew up on Merseyside in a household where neither parent was university educated, and who was lucky enough to get council-funded places at two really good independent schools, social mobility is always close to my heart.

It was a big part of what I wanted to achieve with creative skills when I was at the Opera House...

...And it was why, when I came back to the BBC, I set the target of making apprentices one percent of our workforce, and offering at least as many opportunities to non-graduates as graduates.

In 2012, we had 37 apprentices. By 2014 we'd hit our target – two years early – with 177. Today we have around 350 apprentices and graduate trainees across every area of our organisation, and in every part of the UK.

This is really important. Our local radio stations in particular mean more apprentices are able to take up more opportunities while living at home, instead of facing a move to more expensive areas.

And I can tell you, having met so many of them, the BBC is really benefitting as a result.

There's a lot more to do.

But I'm pleased that the BBC is now top 30 in the Social Mobility Index for organisations taking most action to improve social mobility in the workplace.

We've also been named a Times Top 50 Employer for Women, as well as one of the Best Employers for Race – the only broadcaster and media organisation to be listed.

Our goal is for the BBC to a great place to work for everyone.

We want to lead the way not because we have to, or even because it is the right thing to do...

...It's the *only* thing to do if we want to draw on the full potential of the whole of the country and be the best, strongest and most creative possible BBC.

A strong BBC for the UK

This is important, not only to us, but to the country...

...Because I believe the country now needs a strong BBC more than ever in our history.

It needs us to be the counter to fake news, home and abroad, and lead the way for trust, accuracy, and integrity.

It needs us to carry Britain's voice and influence to the world at a crucial moment, when we are looking to redefine our global relationships and reshape our international identity.

It needs us to fly the flag for British content and invest in British creativity at a time when the giant global media companies are threatening to squeeze out the home-grown, British content that speaks directly to our communities.

It needs us to help make the UK a digital winner, with world-leading creative industries that retain British public service values at their heart...

...Remember: in a world where personal data is increasingly viewed as currency, to be bought and sold for profit, the only thing the BBC wants to do with it is serve audiences better.

And it needs us to support the young people who are on the frontline of digital change; to take responsibility for the impacts of that change by empowering them to navigate the digital landscape with confidence and control.

Conclusion

I know that, to do all of this effectively, we need to change and modernise. That's why I have challenged the BBC to reinvent itself for a new generation in the years ahead.

And we know we need to do it against an incredibly difficult financial context – where we face a real challenge not just to live within our means but also to ensure that we continue to compete on the global stage.

This is tough. It means we have to make some really hard decisions.

But I'm very bullish about the BBC's future. Not least, because right now we are so needed.

This is about much more than the BBC. It is about the need for a public service renaissance; a renewal of public service values at the heart of British life.

For all of us who share those values, I believe our time has come.

The disruptive forces of new technologies and new global media players have brought real benefit to people in the UK – incredible choice and fantastic new possibilities.

Moving fast and breaking things is one thing. But in the process we can't afford to break things that are uniquely British and uniquely valuable. That are, frankly, irreplaceable.

And I believe that public service broadcasting, along with the values that underpin it, are amongst those precious things.

All of us who believe in those values need to be their standard-bearers in a fast-changing world.

We need to take pride in our shared ideals. And we need to stand up for them now like never before.

[Word count: 4,100 approx.]