[GB] BBC Announces Reforms of its Governance

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The UK Government announced plans at the end of 2000 for a fundamental reform of communications regulation, creating a single new regulator to cover both telecommunications and broadcasting (see IRIS 2001-1: 8). A Bill is expected shortly that will implement the proposals. However, a controversial question has been the future regulation of the BBC. The new regulator will be responsible for regulating the BBC's basic standards of taste and decency; the application to it of quotas for matters such as regional and independent productions and the economic regulation of matters such as fair-trading. However, regulation of the BBC's qualitative public service remit will remain with its own Board of Governors, as will regulation to ensure impartiality. The proposals have been heavily criticised, notably by the BBC's commercial competitors, on the ground that the Board of Governors is not independent of BBC management and has not always operated in a transparent manner.

The Chairman of the Governors has now announced reforms to the system of governance. There will be a clearer delineation of the respective responsibilities of the Governors and of the BBC's Executive Committee. Key objectives will be published in Statements of Programme Policy and individual Governors will be given the responsibility to monitor performance against specific objectives each year, supported by a special administrative unit and the BBC's Broadcasting Councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Fair-trading advice will be provided directly by auditors to the Governors, and there will be a clearer separation of responsibilities for handling complaints about programmes, with the Governors being responsible for monitoring complaints-handling by management and the hearing of appeals. A new department of Governance and Accountability will be created to support the Governors, divided into units for Objectives and Compliance, Public Accountability and Business Administration.

The aim is thus to keep the existing self-regulatory system of governance whilst clarifying and defining responsibilities more clearly. The question of whether this is sufficient to justify the BBC's exclusion from Ofcom's remit in relation to its main public service broadcasting remit is, however, likely to remain controversial during the passing of the forthcoming Communications Bill and in the period leading up to the renewal of the BBC's Charter in 2006.

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"BBC Governance in the Ofcom Age", the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 26 February 2002

http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/bbc/pdf/bbcgovernancebooklet.pdf

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