

MANAGING CHANGE IN BROADCAST ORGANISATIONS: BBC PRODUCER CHOICE TWENTY YEARS ON

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ABSTRACT

In 1993, the BBC introduced Producer Choice, a radical organisational change initiative driven largely by external political factors and implemented in a climate of internal opposition and resistance to change. The primary criticisms of the initiative are that it eroded the BBC's craft base and damaged its ability to compete with the private sector, but it is also credited with saving the BBC in its current form. This paper examines the political background to the introduction of Producer Choice and analyses the drivers for change within the paradigm of Porter's Five Forces Model. The planning, implementation and the management of resistance to change are discussed within the theoretical framework of change management literature.

Keywords: Organisational change, Resistance to change, Broadcasting, BBC, Change management, Porter's five forces, Burke-litwin model.

Contribution/ Originality

This study draws on a wide variety of sources and represents a comprehensive synthesis of the available literature on BBC Producer Choice and the associated change management issues presented by the initiative. Its primary contribution is the drawing together of twenty years of literature from academic and contemporary news sources to arrive at a reevaluation of the outcomes arising from the program of change.

1. INTRODUCTION

The British Broadcasting Corporation is one of the largest public service broadcasters in the world. It employs 21,940 people and recorded revenues of £5bn in 2012 (Marketline, 2013). Its domestic services include eight TV channels, ten national radio channels as well as local TV and radio services (Rogers, 2012). The BBC World Service broadcasts in 26 different languages (Midgley, 2011) and BBC Worldwide, the commercial arm of the BBC, sells BBC programming throughout the world, delivering \$216m in revenue in 2012 (The Economist, 2013). The BBC operates under a Royal Charter first granted in 1926. A subsequent charter was granted in 1996 and again in 2006. The 2006 charter has been extended until 2016 (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2006)

Producer Choice was an initiative introduced by John Birt during his tenure as Director-General of the BBC. It was launched in April 1993 with the preparations taking place from the end of 1991. It divided the BBC into “buyers” and “sellers” with the aim of creating an internal market. Programme producers would be given the choice of procuring goods and services on the open market and the internal providers of these services would have to compete with external suppliers (Koenig, 1993). Funding would be channelled directly to programme makers and support functions would have to attract business from programme makers in order to earn funding. Departments that failed to attract enough business from producers would ultimately be shut down (Harris and Wegg-Prosser, 2009). It was intended to formalize relations between producers and resource departments by setting a fixed price for services. It was also seen as a way of ensuring license payers received value for money (Starks, 1993).

Wegg-Prosser (1998) writes that in order for Producer Choice to be implemented, the BBC had to undergo a process of organisational change and therefore Producer Choice had two distinct components, the trading system which resulted from the organisational change and the actual programme of organisational change.

2. THE DRIVERS FOR CHANGE

The drivers behind the introduction of Producer Choice were political, economic, social, technical, legal and environmental and can thus be understood in terms of the PESTLE model. In political terms the BBC had clashed with the Conservative government over its coverage of the Falklands war in 1982 and consequently its request for an increase in the license fee in 1983 was met with little sympathy, so there was an economic incentive to change in order to secure continued funding. By this time, sections of the media also began a concerted campaign against the license fee and called for the BBC to become ad-funded. In social terms, this took place against a backdrop of Margaret Thatcher’s attempts to create a free enterprise society through privatisation in order to increase the number of shareholders in society and promote competition (Candace, 1988). On a technical level, cable and satellite television was already available to UK viewers, which led to further questioning of the license fee as a funding model for the BBC. This combination of factors led to the establishment of the Peacock Committee in 1985 to examine alternative methods of funding the BBC (O’Malley, 2009). Although ultimately the final report of the committee did not recommend that the BBC should become ad-funded it did conclude that British broadcasting should move towards a market -based system (Peacock, 1986). The conclusions of the Peacock Report led to the passing of the Broadcasting Act 1990 and in reaction to the Act the BBC introduced a series of internal reforms, which became known as Producer Choice (Deakin and Pratten, 1999). The introduction of an internal market at the BBC took place in the context of internal markets being introduced to public services in general with a view to increasing the quality of provision and by the time Producer Choice was implemented in 1993 internal markets had already been introduced in the NHS (Mullen, 1990) and to housing and education (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993), and can as such be understood in the context of a changing public services environment.

The factors driving the need for change at the BBC can also be understood in terms of Porter's Five Forces Model (Porter, 1979). The 1990 Broadcasting Act compelled the BBC to purchase 25% of its programming from independent producers thereby increasing the power of suppliers. It also imposed this quota on ITV and Channel 4, adding more buyers to the market and putting the BBC in competition for programming. Additionally, the Act introduced a license for a fifth terrestrial channel, adding a new entrant to the market. In terms of substitutes to BBC services, cable television had been available in the UK since the 1970s and Sky had begun satellite broadcasting in 1989, winning exclusive rights to broadcast live football matches from the newly formed Premier League in 1992 (Doyle and Hibberd, 2005), Born (2004) states that the introduction of Producer Choice allowed the BBC to "pre-empt possible government action" but also helped to create a culture of entrepreneurialism that allowed the BBC to compete against market forces.

3. THE CHANGE OBJECTIVES

Deakin *et al.* (2009) see Producer Choice as having two main objectives. Firstly it intended to allow the BBC to gather information on the overhead costs of its programmes and secondly it allowed them to benchmark the cost of internal resources against those provided by external suppliers with the aim of reducing costs and ensuring value for money. It was also intended to reduce bureaucracy by introducing a rational system based on information and quality metrics (Harris and Wegg-Prosser, 2007). The BBC were also aware of the need to secure Charter Renewal in 1996 and the accountability and efficiency that Producer Choice was intended to provide was thought to be the best way of achieving this (Wegg-Prosser, 1998). Given the intense pressure the BBC was under to be seen to be delivering value for money in the wake of the Peacock report, it was vital for the BBC to be able to collect these financial metrics and it is difficult to see how it could have continued without implementing some kind of institutional efficiency based change. MacDonald (2004) takes the view that "the license fee puts the BBC in a peculiarly weak position to resist the imposition of what others consider to be good management" and ultimately the need for change was influenced by external factors over which the BBC had little control.

4. IDENTIFYING THE STAKEHOLDERS

Some stakeholder analysis mapping models seek to describe stakeholders in terms of influence and interest. Mendelow (1991) developed the famous power-interest matrix while Mitchell *et al.* (1997) added urgency as a third dimension. Anderson *et al.* (1999) created a problem-frame matrix, which describes stakeholders in terms of influence and opposition to a project, similar in approach to Savage *et al.* (1991) who sought to identify stakeholders in terms of co-operation. Newcombe (2003) criticizes the two-dimensional view of stakeholders as simplistic and others such as Turner *et al.* (2009) and Fletcher *et al.* (2003) have taken a more complex and multi-dimensional approach to stakeholder analysis.

The UK Government and the license fee payers can be considered stakeholders in the context of Producer Choice as a primary purpose of Producer Choice was to cut costs and deliver value to the license payers (Andrews, 2005). Although the UK Government exercised considerable influence on the drivers for the organisational change, they had little direct influence on its implementation. They did, however, have considerable power in setting the level of the license fee, so they exerted some control over the funding for the project and had a high level of interest in seeing it realise its objectives.

The independent production sector had a high level of interest in seeing Producer Choice implemented because of the 25% quota for independently produced programming, although they had no influence on the implementation of the change programme. Producer Choice went on to have a big effect on the independent production sector and greatly expanded the programme market (Pratt and Gornostaeva, 2009).

In common with the independent production sector, operators of independent recording and film studios, outside broadcast fleet operators, equipment rental houses, production caterers and post-production houses all had a significant interest in the implementation of Producer Choice, although again they had little direct influence on the programme.

At the time of the introduction of the Producer Choice change programme the BBC had 21,400 staff, all of whom were stakeholders in the change programme. Of these some 12,000 worked in resources or services and under the new plan they would become “sellers”. The remainder worked in programme making and would become “buyers” under the new regime. The union BECTU represented around 56% of the workforce and they too were significant stakeholders (Wegg-Prosser, 1998). An analysis of BBC staff as stakeholders is best understood in terms of Anderson *et al.* (1999) as the initiative was deeply unpopular with staff from the moment it was announced and met with immediate opposition from the unions. However, Bloomfield (2008) suggests that there were many “true believers”, especially among senior management, and opposition was not universal. BECTU were also in opposition to the change programme (Koenig, 1993) and were influential stakeholders in that they could have balloted for industrial action in an attempt to block it. Rather than try to influence the programme, many staff chose to leave the organisation in preference to adapting to the new ways of working (Nicoli, 2012)

5. PLANNING THE CHANGE

Felix (2000) explains that the Producer Choice change programme was based on the Burke-Litwin model (Burke and Litwin, 1992). The model attempts to bring about change by linking organisational performance with internal and external factors and it is primarily a diagnostic tool for assessing the impact of these factors on organisational effectiveness (Martins and Coetzee, 2009). It also seeks to identify which elements of organisational performance are linked to climate dynamics and which elements are linked to cultural dynamics (Burke and Litwin, 1992).

Preparations for the launch of the Producer Choice initiative took place between the end of 1991 and April 1993 and the project took place within a strict 18-month timeframe. The change programme was overseen by a steering committee, which identified 107 activities needed for

implementation. A communication strategy was implemented consisting of workshops, Q&A forums, meetings and brochure distribution and training courses were provided. A review of utilization and resources was carried out alongside market testing activities. 72 senior managers were involved in a simulation exercise, which identified a number of implementation problems prior to the launch (Carnall, 2003).

Wegg-Prosser (1998) describes how the actions required to implement Producer Choice were planned. Firstly, in March 1992 resource functions were arranged into business units following an earlier resource review. This represented a major change in the organisation of departments, but also a major change in thinking and focus as each unit was now a discreet business within the structure of the BBC and was expected to earn income, rather than have funding allocated. The division of resources into business units was a difficult and time-consuming process and by the time Producer Choice launched in April 1993 there were 481 business units in operation. Tariff modelling was employed to set the price of services, although Wegg-Prosser points out that initially this was set against historic costs and not benchmarked against the private sector as was originally intended, as benchmarked figures did not become available until the next financial year.

In order to support the new arrangements, new financial systems had to be put in place in order to reflect the new reality of resource centres as business units, but by March 1992 these were behind schedule and would not become functional until the following April, which threatened to delay the change programme.

Wegg-Prosser (1998) identifies training as the final aspect of the change programme and it was intended that this would continue after Producer Choice was implemented. Managers were trained to write business plans and manage accounts and the consultancy group Coopers (now Price Waterhouse Coopers) were engaged to run business-planning courses. The main objectives of the training programme were to increase awareness of the programme, to train managers in its administration and to test and dry run the system. However, only 8% of staff attended training sessions related to the programme and the training was criticised as tokenism.

6. THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

The actual process of implementation was managed by external consultants, mainly from the Coopers consultancy group. The use of consultants was resented by many BBC staff (Wegg-Prosser, 1998) and Birt's reliance on consultants was heavily criticised in the press (Hastings, 2002; Milmo, 2002; Born, 2003; Storey and Salaman, 2005; Lloyd, 2012). However, Birt defended the use of consultants to implement the change, pointing out that the use of consultants was common practice in large corporations. Others within the BBC also defended the use of consultants, maintaining that the change could not have been achieved in the timeframe without using external change agents as the BBC simply did not have the skills available internally (Wegg-Prosser, 1998).

Several commentators argue that the process of change was managed awkwardly, ruthlessly and inefficiently (Barnett and Curry, 1994; Horrie and Clarke, 1994; Curran and Seaton, 2003) and certainly some elements of the implementation were handled badly. The sheer scope of the

programme and what was seen as an unrealistic timeframe for implementation caused tensions at every level. Employees, who were normally accustomed to a culture of shared decision-making, resented the lack of consultation and debate. Negotiation of the customer-supplier relationships happened late in the programme as these were delayed by the necessity to provide training, which did not commence until halfway through the change process. Additionally, trading guidelines did not become available until March 1993 and the technical systems needed to support the system were delayed until February, leaving little time for training. The finance systems were viewed as not fit for purpose and there was concern among staff that business units were being allocated funding based on incorrect information (Wegg-Prosser, 1998).

7. MANAGING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Prediscan *et al.* (2013) identify a number of factors that influence the intensity of resistance to change. These include trust in the change agent, attitude towards company policy and strategy, the level of training and the how quickly a job can be secured outside of the organisation. Lundy and Morin (2013) suggest that an effective leadership style can help reduce resistance to change. Ford *et al.* (2008) lay the blame for resistance to change squarely at the door of change agents, arguing that change agents contribute to resistance through their actions and inactions.

Resistance to Producer Choice appears to have been widespread and the initiative was often criticised in public by BBC presenters (Andrews, 2005). As already pointed out there was much resentment of the role of PWC, and this might have informed the intensity of resistance. The lack of training would have also led to uncertainty over the nature of the change programme and its outcomes and would have served to increase resistance to the change. Negative views of Birt's leadership style were also widespread, with one member of staff likening his inaugural speech at the BBC to the start of a totalitarian regime (Leith, 1992). It is quite likely that the negative perception of Birt's leadership manifested itself as a negative perception of the Producer Choice change programme and that this contributed to the resistance to change.

Staff surveys conducted at the time of the change programme revealed that staff felt less valued and that the new system impeded creativity. They felt that they had lost control of their destiny and that the change was too rapid and radical (Cheung-Judge and Powley, 2006). It is evident therefore that staff reacted negatively to the new proposals, again increasing the level of resistance to the change.

Magala (2005) writes that staff and managers never let go of the assumption that Producer Choice was inferior to the system that it was designed to replace. He claims that, although data produced by the BBC reported the project to be a success, staff managed to undermine the project's goals through culturally embedded resistance. He claims that resistance to the change took a number of forms. Firstly departments were meant to provide data to the external consultants who were managing the change project, but managed to exercise a degree of control over the calculations by exercising discretion. Secondly, the heads of the new business units often colluded by negotiating informal terms of trade between departments so that they continued to exercise some control over internal pricing. Magala also points out that some managers managed

to protect certain departments from market forces by mixing cash cost analysis and overheads when establishing pricing policies. Magala (2005) is of the view that those within the BBC simply “played the game of both embracing the change project and mediating the complex process of restructuring in a way that protected their positions”

Producer Choice was a top-down initiative that was imposed by management on staff (Barnett and Curry, 1994) and there appears to be little evidence that the resistance to change was managed in any meaningful way. The change agents made little attempt at cultural alignment and many staff never reached the acceptance stage of the change curve (Hindle, 2010) preferring instead to leave the organisation. It was felt that the change agents could have been more conciliatory and made a better attempt at securing buy-in, but ultimately their ability to manage resistance to the change was constrained by the 18-month time frame for implementation (Wegg-Prosser, 1998).

8. SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

By implementing Producer Choice, the BBC was able to fend off some of its most vocal political critics (Schlesinger, 2010) so the change was successful in this regard. A failure to introduce Producer Choice might have resulted in privatization or the corporation being broken up and sold-off (The Economist, 1997), so in this sense it might have been said to have saved the BBC. Brown (1994) states that the Major government were impressed by Producer Choice and the reforms probably influenced the findings of a 1992 Green Paper on the future of the BBC, which recommended that it continue to be financed by the licence fee. Government support for Producer Choice was reaffirmed in a 1994 White Paper “The Future of the BBC: Serving the Nation, Competing Worldwide” and this white paper formed the basis for the BBC’s Charter renewal in 1996 (Potschka, 2012), so it certainly succeeded in its aim of securing Charter Renewal.

Producer Choice was also successful in making the BBC more transparent and accountable in financial terms. It allowed it to gather financial data and metrics that could demonstrate how it was providing value for money. However, Harris and Wegg-Prosser (2009) argue that this came at the cost of creativity and innovation. The programme was also successful in cutting costs, saving £233m between 1993 and 1996 (The Economist, 1997) although it is not clear how much of these savings were as a result of the efficiency of the Producer Choice system and how many were the result of redundancies and resignations.

While the change programme was successful in that it introduced a functioning internal market, many felt that it went too far in costing services. Producers were charged for every video clip and it was often cheaper to buy a CD outside than rent one from the BBC music library (Hill and Jones, 2008). Researchers consulted book-shops rather than pay to use the BBC library; West End recording studios were cheaper to hire than the facilities at Broadcasting House and presenters stopped consulting the Pronunciation Department as the cost was prohibitive, preferring instead to guess at the correct pronunciation (MacGregor, 2006)

Producer Choice was probably less successful in its aim of reducing bureaucracy and by 2000, when Greg Dyke replaced John Birt as Director-General, the BBC was as complex and bureaucratic as before the introduction of Producer Choice (Potschka, 2012) and the system was seen as simply replacing one form of bureaucracy with another (Koenig, 1993). One manifestation of this increased bureaucracy is that accounts department had to be expanded in order to administer the system at the same time as resource departments such as costume and make-up were being shut down (Born, 2004).

Leys (2003) claims that Producer Choice forced the BBC to compete with the commercial sector on uneven terms. Because producers were allowed to choose external services to facilitate programme making, this reduced the income available to the various resource departments, forcing them to charge more to cover costs and therefore become less competitive over time. Resource departments however were not allowed to bid for non-BBC work and had no way of earning if producers choose not to use them so the system was fundamentally one-sided. This had the unintended effect of eroding the skills base of the BBC with respect to technical craft. As uncompetitive resource departments were shut down, programme makers had no choice but to secure resources externally as there was no BBC equivalent so it effectively it could be said that it failed in its intention to offer choice (Barnett and Curry, 1994; Wegg-Prosser, 1998).

9. THE NEED FOR FURTHER CHANGE

While Producer Choice managed to change business processes, it probably failed to implement cultural change and many old attitudes and perspectives remained. There was also a recognition that it had not succeeded in winning hearts and minds and in obtaining buy-in at every level. Although Producer Choice survived until 2006, the free-market rhetoric of the Birt era ended in 1999 with the introduction of another major change programme, One BBC: Making it Happen. One BBC was more concerned with establishing cultural norms than with establishing organisational processes. Where Producer Choice used the Burke-Letwin model simply as a diagnostic tool and then sought to impose change in a top down manner, One BBC used the altogether more democratic Appreciative Inquiry Model (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) to analyse the need for change and to engage staff in the process of change (Cheung-Judge and Powley)

One BBC grew out of a recognition that previous top-down change initiatives like Producer Choice had failed to penetrate the heart of the BBC and had led to resistance and change fatigue. Where Producer Choice had perhaps led to a more efficient leaner BBC, it was also felt that it had fragmented the BBC and left it divided, something One BBC was meant to address. Where Producer Choice had engaged just 8% of the workforce through training, One BBC engaged 37% of staff in its AI sessions. Where Producer Choice was led by a team of consultants, One BBC had just one, and was seen as a “do it yourself” change initiative. (Spindler and Van Den Brul, 2006).

10. CONCLUSIONS

The Producer Choice change programme can be viewed as a response to external factors that largely succeeded in its initial aims. However, it also had unintended consequences and was a systems-based initiative which failed to address underlying cultural issues. While it secured Charter Renewal and allowed the BBC to retain its license fee based funding model in the face of opposition, it also had the effect of damaging the BBC's craft-base and fracturing the organisation, issues which had to be addressed by subsequent change programmes.

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