

**Make the BBC Mostly Subscription Funded**  
**TWOP.ORG.UK; POLICY BANK**  
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**Appendix - Why Not a Fully Subscription-Funded BBC?**

At first glance, a fully subscription-funded BBC appears to offer an elegant solution to the problems of the licence fee. It would eliminate regressive charges, align payment with usage, remove criminal enforcement and place the BBC on the same footing as other content providers in a competitive media market.

However, closer examination suggests that a full subscription model would undermine core public purposes of the BBC while introducing new risks that outweigh its apparent simplicity.

1. Public goods cannot be sustained by voluntary demand alone  
BBC news, emergency broadcasting and national information services function as public goods. Their value is not confined to those who actively choose to pay for them, but extends to society as a whole: informed citizens, shared facts and trusted information during crises.

A fully subscription-funded model would inevitably narrow access to these services, particularly among lower-income households and disengaged audiences. Over time, this would weaken the BBC's role as a common reference point in public life, with consequences for democratic discourse that are difficult to reverse.

2. A subscription-only BBC would intensify inequality of access  
Subscription models privilege those with disposable income, digital confidence and stable connectivity. While this may be acceptable for entertainment services, it sits uneasily with institutions expected to serve rural populations, older audiences and those on lower incomes.

The UK already exhibits significant inequalities in digital access and media consumption. A full subscription model would harden those divides, particularly in relation to radio and news services, which continue to play a disproportionate role in social inclusion.

3. Market logic would reshape editorial priorities  
A fully subscription-funded BBC would face strong incentives to prioritise content that drives acquisition and retention. Over time, this would place pressure on programming that is culturally valuable but commercially marginal: local radio, minority-interest content, educational output and some forms of investigative journalism.

While editorial independence could be formally protected, funding dependence on subscriber behaviour would exert a subtle but persistent influence on commissioning decisions.

4. Revenue volatility would increase, not decrease  
Subscription income is inherently more volatile than mixed funding. Churn, price sensitivity and competition from global platforms would expose the BBC to sharper revenue shocks, particularly during economic downturns.

The licence fee's weakness is not instability, but misalignment. Replacing it wholesale with subscription income would trade one problem for another, without guaranteeing financial resilience.

5. Transition risks would be politically and operationally high

Moving directly to a full subscription model would require rapid restructuring, large-scale marketing and potentially abrupt service withdrawal from non-subscribers. The political backlash from perceived loss of universal provision would be substantial and the risk of reputational damage during transition would be high.

A hybrid model allows for gradual adaptation, testing audience behaviour while preserving core services.

6. Hybrid reform achieves most of the benefits with fewer costs

A mostly subscription-funded model captures many of the advantages of full subscription – alignment with usage, reduced reliance on regressive funding, flexibility in pricing and packaging – while retaining universal access where it matters most.

Full subscription solutions may offer conceptual purity, but hybrid reform offers governability.

**Conclusion**

A fully subscription-funded BBC is attractive in theory, but fragile in practice. It risks undermining the BBC's public purposes, narrowing access and increasing financial volatility, while imposing significant political and operational costs.

A hybrid model accepts the realities of modern media consumption without abandoning the principles that justify public service broadcasting. It is not the most ideologically neat solution, but it is the most defensible one.

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