

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #173

The BBC

6th Jul, 2021

Alastair Budge: [00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about something that is close to almost every Brit's heart, and that is the BBC.

[00:00:32] I'm sure you have heard of it, you have probably watched it, listened to it, or read articles by the BBC.

[00:00:41] But I imagine that you might not know a huge amount about it - about how it works, how it is [funded¹](#), the mission it has, and what the future might hold for it.

¹ provided with money



[00:00:53] So, in 20 minutes time I hope that some of these questions will be answered, and you will know a little bit more about something that is a British cultural [institution](#)², and is in fact the oldest national [broadcasting](#)³ organisation in the entire world.

[00:01:13] OK then, let's talk about the BBC.

[00:01:17] Just in case you weren't aware of what the letters BBC [stand for](#)⁴, it's the British [Broadcasting](#) Corporation.

[00:01:25] It's the world's oldest national [broadcaster](#)⁵, and the largest [broadcaster](#) in the world by number of employees.

[00:01:34] Its mission is, and I'm quoting directly here, 'to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the [provision](#)⁶ of [impartial](#)⁷, high-quality and [distinctive](#)⁸ [outputs](#)⁹ and services which inform, educate and entertain'.

² an important organisation

³ having a television or radio presentation

⁴ represent

⁵ something that provides a television or radio presentation

⁶ the act of providing something, offering

⁷ not supporting any particular side, objective

⁸ characteristic, easy to recognise

⁹ amounts of products



[00:01:52] The [key](#)¹⁰ words there for me are ‘inform, educate, and entertain’.

[00:01:58] This is at the [core](#)¹¹ of everything the BBC aims to do.

[00:02:03] Provide information. Educate people, and entertain them.

[00:02:07] I wouldn’t like to make any comparison between this [humble](#)¹² podcast and the [gigantic](#)¹³ BBC, but at least, I think we have these three goals in common.

[00:02:19] So, what does the BBC actually do then to achieve its mission?

[00:02:24] Well, it produces and [broadcasts](#)¹⁴ shows on tv, radio, and online.

[00:02:30] From news to drama, sports to language learning, nature documentaries to children's shows, almost anything you can imagine hearing, seeing, or reading, it’s probably done by the BBC.

¹⁰ something important in order to understand something

¹¹ centre, base

¹² not large, modest

¹³ extremely large

¹⁴ presentations on radio or television



[00:02:46] Since it was founded in 1922, almost 100 years ago now, it has [faithfully](#)¹⁵ and [diligently](#)¹⁶ [broadcast](#)¹⁷ news and entertainment to the British public, and I should also say, to the world.

[00:02:59] It has what's called a Royal Charter, a special licence from the government.

[00:03:06] This makes it, essentially, a state media company.

[00:03:10] Although unlike let's say in North Korea, you won't find newsreaders on the BBC constantly praising the leaders of the country.

[00:03:19] The BBC has editorial independence - it has the right, the [obligation](#)¹⁸ even, to report [impartially](#)¹⁹, and to present multiple arguments, multiple points of view.

[00:03:33] This actually is easier said than done, as we'll talk about shortly.

[00:03:39] So, the BBC is a state media [broadcaster](#), a state media company, and it is [funded](#), it gets its money, from the people, from British taxpayers.

¹⁵ in a way that can be trusted

¹⁶ in a careful way

¹⁷ provided

¹⁸ something that is required because it is the right thing to do

¹⁹ without favouring one thing more than another



[00:03:50] How this works is that if you watch live TV, or if you watch 'catch-up' BBC tv, on their service called 'iPlayer', you are required to pay a TV licence fee, which is currently £154.50, so that's around €180 or \$200, per year.

[00:04:12] This is paid by 23 million households in the UK, about 83% of the population.

[00:04:20] The fact that everyone who has a TV is required to pay this [fee](#)²⁰ to the BBC, is the subject of not a small amount of [controversy](#)²¹, and indeed in the era when we are increasingly not [tuning in](#)²² to watch a film or [programme](#)²³ at a fixed time on a TV in a living room, it is far harder to actually [police](#)²⁴, to [enforce](#)²⁵ the collection of this licence [fee](#).

[00:04:47] The other effect of this licence fee is that, because everyone who watches TV is [essentially](#)²⁶ a paying customer of the BBC, there is a greater feeling of [entitlement](#)²⁷ over what the BBC should and shouldn't do.

²⁰ payment

²¹ disagreement

²² turning on the TV

²³ a presentation of something on TV

²⁴ cause something to happen by necessity, regulate

²⁵ cause something to happen by necessity or make sure that it happens

²⁶ basically, in effect

²⁷ the right to do something



[00:05:04] Rightly so, as a paying customer of something, you feel like you have a greater right to speak your opinion than if you were getting something for free.

[00:05:14] Now, the end result of this is that the BBC is subject to²⁸ constant complaints²⁹ - people complaining³⁰ that something was offensive³¹ to them, or that a political opinion was expressed that they disagreed with.

[00:05:30] Although many businesses would be very envious³² of the BBC's 23 million customers who are in effect forced by law to buy a subscription to the BBC, it does mean that you have 23 million households to potentially³³ offend.

[00:05:48] We'll talk about a few implications³⁴ of this in a minute.

[00:05:52] But the BBC isn't completely funded by the British people.

[00:05:56] The majority of the rest of its income comes from selling programmes³⁵ to foreign TV networks. If you have watched Sherlock, or Downton Abbey, or Call The

²⁸ affected by

²⁹ expressions of disapproval

³⁰ saying that something is wrong

³¹ causing someone to be offended, annoyed or upset

³² wishing they had what it had

³³ possibly

³⁴ consequences

³⁵ presentations on TV



Midwife on TV outside the UK, then the BBC will have sold the rights to show that [programme](#).

[00:06:16] And it makes a lot of money from that, around £1.4 billion, which is around 1.6 billion Euros.

[00:06:25] It also gets a [grant](#)³⁶ from the British government to make things like English learning resources, which is all part of British soft power, of trying to help people learn English and be attracted to life in the UK.

[00:06:41] If you have listened to one of the very early episodes on soft power then you will know all about that.

[00:06:49] Now, we have covered some introductory information about the BBC, and how it is [funded](#).

[00:06:55] Let's move on to discussing what this actually means in terms of the content that it produces.

[00:07:02] As a reminder, its mission is “to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the [provision](#) of [impartial](#), high-quality and [distinctive output](#)³⁷ and services which inform, educate and entertain”.

[00:07:19] So, on a practical level, what does this actually mean?

³⁶ an amount of money given by the government for a particular purpose

³⁷ products



[00:07:23] Let's [dissect](#)³⁸ each part, and start with “the public interest”.

[00:07:28] If you look in the dictionary, you'll find “the public interest” defined as something like “the [welfare](#)³⁹ or well-being of the general public”. So, if something is in the public interest, it is a good thing for people to be aware of.

[00:07:44] Informing people about the news in their country could be in the public interest. So could informing them about changes to laws, or bad behaviour of politicians.

[00:07:56] But the [distinction](#)⁴⁰ between something that is in the public interest and something that isn't in the public interest is, of course, not always clear.

[00:08:07] For example, there was a famous interview that was [broadcast](#) on the BBC between a young journalist called Martin Bashir and Lady Diana, the then wife of Prince Charles, the Queen's son.

[00:08:21] During this interview, Princess Diana admitted to her and Charles' [extra-marital](#)⁴¹ affairs, and it was ultimately an interview that led to their divorce.

³⁸ examine in detail

³⁹ well-being

⁴⁰ difference

⁴¹ outside of marriage



[00:08:33] Although it was over 25 years ago now, it has come under [renewed](#)⁴² [scrutiny](#)⁴³, as it was [alleged](#)⁴⁴ that the BBC journalist had tricked Lady Diana into giving him the interview.

[00:08:46] Now, to go back to the BBC's mission, it is certainly less clear whether this kind of interview was in the public interest.

[00:08:56] If the news story is about a member of the Royal family, sure it might make for entertaining viewing, but is it by default in the public interest?

[00:09:08] Certainly, there isn't an easy answer.

[00:09:11] Now, let's [dissect](#) the second part of the BBC's mission, "[serving](#)⁴⁵ all audiences through the [provision](#) of [impartial](#), high-quality and [distinctive](#) output"

[00:09:24] The most important word here is "[impartial](#)", meaning without [bias](#)⁴⁶, objective, without a strong opinion either way.

[00:09:34] Being [impartial](#) is a lot harder than some people think.

⁴² having been resumed, started again

⁴³ careful and detailed examination

⁴⁴ said without giving proof

⁴⁵ providing a service to

⁴⁶ supporting something or someone because of personal reasons and not because it is fair



[00:09:38] It means not expressing opinions, it means [concealing](#)⁴⁷ what you actually think about something, even if you might have a very strong opinion, you are not allowed to show it.

[00:09:50] It also means allowing different opinions to be [aired](#)⁴⁸, different opinions to be shown from the entire [political spectrum](#)⁴⁹, left to right.

[00:10:00] Despite [pledging](#)⁵⁰ to be politically neutral, the BBC is forever [criticised](#)⁵¹ by both right and left.

[00:10:08] On the political right, it is [criticised](#) for being too [liberal](#)⁵², too left, and too full of the [metropolitan](#)⁵³ elite.

[00:10:16] This is particularly true at the moment, when there is a Conservative government, and the BBC asks hard questions of the government.

⁴⁷ hiding

⁴⁸ presented on TV

⁴⁹ range of political opinions

⁵⁰ formally promising

⁵¹ receiving negative judgements

⁵² promoting socially progressive or new ideas

⁵³ having education, money and living in the large cities



[00:10:26] But when there is a Labour government, a centre-left government, the BBC tends to get criticised for being too conservative-leaning⁵⁴, for being too right wing.

[00:10:39] During the 2016 Brexit referendum it was criticised by both sides at the same time. The Leave side, the side for Brexit, criticised the BBC for being anti-Brexit, and the Remain side, the side that supported remaining in the EU, criticised it for being pro-Brexit.

[00:11:01] So, if both sides are saying that the BBC is biased⁵⁵, that is normally a pretty good sign that it is doing a decent job at remaining objective, of remaining impartial.

[00:11:14] This balance of opinion is generally given not through the newsreaders or through the interviews, but the choice of guests, the choice of interviewees⁵⁶ that are invited to join a BBC programme.

[00:11:29] The debate shows will generally invite people from a range of different opinions, to ensure⁵⁷ that there is some balanced discussion.

[00:11:38] Finding that balance of opinions is, of course, hard, but the BBC does generally do this quite well.

⁵⁴ promoting traditional ideas

⁵⁵ supporting something or someone because of personal reasons and not because it is fair

⁵⁶ people who answer the questions during an interview

⁵⁷ make something certain to happen



[00:11:46] It does [beg the question](#)⁵⁸, though, of what is 'balanced'.

[00:11:50] And how much 'airtime'⁵⁹ should be given to different opinions?

[00:11:55] There are evidently some views that are so [niche](#)⁶⁰, some that are so ridiculous, or some that are so extreme that they are [offensive](#), that probably don't deserve any kind of airtime.

[00:12:08] But, especially in recent years where there has been a growth in [extremism](#)⁶¹, of people having more 'extreme' views, the BBC has been accused of providing a [platform](#)⁶² for these opinions that are considered to be more dangerous and more [radical](#)⁶³.

⁵⁸ cause an obvious question

⁵⁹ the amount of time something is on TV

⁶⁰ interesting for only a small, specialised section of the population

⁶¹ extreme ideas or views

⁶² base for them to stand and grow

⁶³ representing extreme changes



[00:12:26] Now, going back to its mission again, the BBC has the [duty](#)⁶⁴ to “[serve](#)⁶⁵ all audiences”, and just because an audience might have a different opinion to you, does this mean that it shouldn't be [served](#)⁶⁶?

[00:12:42] Whatever the BBC does, it will always have [critics](#)⁶⁷ - on the one hand people who say that too much [airtime](#) is given to extremist views, and on the other hand, people who hold those views will say that the BBC is too [liberal](#), is too ‘left wing’, or that it tries to make everything too neutral.

[00:13:02] So the BBC has a hard time pleasing everyone.

[00:13:08] The result of this is that the BBC has gained a reputation in the UK for extreme [caution](#)⁶⁸, and for trying to represent every single interest group or demographic, equally.

[00:13:21] No matter your skin colour, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other factor, the BBC tries to represent you.

⁶⁴ responsibility

⁶⁵ provide a service to

⁶⁶ provided a service

⁶⁷ people who say that they don't approve of something

⁶⁸ care to avoid mistakes



[00:13:31] That is, in my view at least, a pretty great thing, and a [noble](#)⁶⁹ development, but it has meant that it is often the object of [ridicule](#)⁷⁰, that people make fun of it.

[00:13:44] There's actually a really good, what's called 'mockumentary', a kind of comedy documentary, called W1A, which is a BBC series that makes fun of how [politically correct](#)⁷¹ the BBC is, and how everyone is so afraid of [offending](#)⁷² a particular group that nothing ever gets done.

[00:14:04] It's definitely worth a watch, and is a great example of this extreme [caution](#) that the BBC exercises. Again it's called W1A.

[00:14:15] In terms of what the BBC actually does, in terms of the [programmes](#) it actually produces, it would take us hours, days, weeks, to talk about all of them, so I want to just give you an [overview](#)⁷³.

[00:14:28] The BBC both makes its own [programmes](#), and buys [programmes](#) from other production companies.

⁶⁹ showing qualities of honesty, fairness and bravery

⁷⁰ expressions used in order to make fun of something

⁷¹ avoiding the expression of ideas that may upset or insult someone

⁷² upsetting or insulting

⁷³ a short description



[00:14:34] I guess you will have probably watched quite a few BBC [programmes](#) yourself, as they are often exported all over the world, and shown on other, non-bbc, tv channels.

[00:14:47] To list some that I imagine you might have come across, there are the amazing 'nature documentary' series, things like The Blue Planet, Planet Earth, and Walking with Dinosaurs.

[00:15:00] There was the longest running weekly music show in history, called Top of The Pops, which hosted everything from The Beatles and The Rolling Stones to Madonna and The Spice Girls.

[00:15:12] Of course the classic comedies, things like Monty Python and Fawlty Towers.

[00:15:17] And the most recent hit success from the BBC - and I have to confess, I don't really understand the [appeal](#)⁷⁴ of this, I don't really see why it was so popular, was The Great British Bake Off, the show where people make cakes.

[00:15:35] Now, the BBC will celebrate its 100th birthday next year, but it hasn't actually been [broadcasting non-stop](#)⁷⁵ for a hundred years.

[00:15:44] All TV [broadcasting](#) was stopped during the Second World War.

⁷⁴ the quality of being attractive or interesting

⁷⁵ without stopping, continuously



[00:15:48] The BBC was partly moved out of London, and of course, the nation had bigger [concerns](#)⁷⁶ than producing great documentaries.

[00:15:58] So the BBC was taken off air, the TVs were turned off from September 1939, [allegedly](#)⁷⁷ in the middle of a Mickey Mouse cartoon.

[00:16:08] And the TVs were [switched off](#)⁷⁸ until 1946 - there was no TV for 7 years.

[00:16:15] The story goes that when service resumed, after 7 years of pause, they started again at the same point from the same Mickey Mouse cartoon but only after the announcer said “As I was saying before I was so [rudely](#)⁷⁹ [interrupted](#)⁸⁰.”

[00:16:31] For those of you familiar with the British sense of humour, that probably makes a lot of sense. It is a very British thing to say, to [play down](#)⁸¹ the fact that there has been a long and tragic war, and instead refer to being [rudely interrupted](#).

[00:16:47] Even though it makes for a great story, unfortunately it is an [urban myth](#)⁸², it's not true.

⁷⁶ things to worry about

⁷⁷ without being sure that it happened

⁷⁸ turned off

⁷⁹ not in a polite way

⁸⁰ stopped by something

⁸¹ represent something as being less important than it is

⁸² a humorous story that is being told without being true



[00:16:55] The real story is actually just as endearing⁸³, just as sweet and funny.

[00:17:01] The first person to appear when the TVs were turned back on and service resumed was a lady called Jasmine Bligh and her first words were "Good afternoon, everybody. How are you? Do you remember me, Jasmine Bligh...?"

[00:17:16] Here's a clip of her.

[00:17:18] **Jasmine Bligh:** [00:17:18] "Hi, how are you?, do you remember me, Jasmine Bligh...".

[00:17:22] **Alastair Budge:** [00:17:22] Now, given that the BBC is about to celebrate its 100th anniversary, this has led to renewed debate over the purpose it serves, how it is funded, and how it competes⁸⁴ in a world full of Disney, Netflix, Amazon, and other well-oiled⁸⁵ businesses that also offer compelling⁸⁶ TV.

⁸³ sweet and likeable

⁸⁴ tries to be as (or more) successful as others in the same field

⁸⁵ operating successfully

⁸⁶ very interesting



[00:17:44] There have been [petitions](#)⁸⁷ to [abolish](#)⁸⁸ the licence [fee](#), arguing that it is a tax on anyone who wants to watch television, and that it just isn't an effective way to [fund](#)⁸⁹ a national [broadcaster](#).

[00:17:57] There is also debate over the [existence](#)⁹⁰ of a national [broadcaster](#).

[00:18:02] Should there be a state media company that tries to please everyone?

[00:18:07] With something like the “public interest” so hard to [define](#)⁹¹, who and how should decide what qualifies as “in the public interest”?

[00:18:17] If it is indeed a service that exists for the benefit of the country, wouldn't it make more sense for the [fee](#) to be paid directly as a tax, rather than households paying the same amount for it?

[00:18:31] Several countries have already gone this route, Sweden, for example, and wouldn't this be a more sensible way of [funding](#)⁹² the organisation?

[00:18:40] The debate over [funding](#) the BBC has been going on since the 1980s, and nobody has yet come up with a better way to do it. Something surely has to change, but

⁸⁷ requests

⁸⁸ put an end to

⁸⁹ provide with money for a particular purpose

⁹⁰ the fact of something being, existing

⁹¹ to say what its meaning is

⁹² providing with money for a particular purpose



whether that is a national tax, a subscription system, or the breaking up of different parts of the BBC, it seems unlikely that there will be agreement at any time in the near future.

[00:19:05] And in terms of how the BBC competes in a world dominated by tech giants that have started to move in on its territory, this is obviously an important question not just for the BBC itself, but for the people in the UK who pay for it.

[00:19:23] Especially for the younger generation, let's say those aged between 16-25, the amount of time they spend sitting in front of a TV and watching traditional television programmes is dropping every year.

[00:19:38] Whether it's YouTube, Netflix, or other forms of social media, the BBC has had to accept that the days of a family gathering around at a fixed time to catch a programme on BBC One will not be around forever.

[00:19:54] And there doesn't seem to be a simple answer for what the BBC could, or should, do about it.



[00:20:01] Now, despite all its [faults](#)⁹³ and [imperfections](#)⁹⁴, it's hard to [deny](#)⁹⁵ that it is an amazing and [enduring](#)⁹⁶ [institution](#), and it has a pretty special place in almost every Brit's heart.

[00:20:14] Especially in the era of fake news, and of private companies [encroaching](#)⁹⁷ on the media industry, the BBC's long history of public service, and of [impartiality](#)⁹⁸, or reporting events [fairly](#)⁹⁹ and objectively is more important than ever before.

[00:20:33] So, it is certainly my hope that the BBC is going to continue to inform, educate, and entertain for quite some time to come.

[00:20:45] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on the British [institution](#) that is the BBC, the British [Broadcasting](#) Corporation.

[00:20:54] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:20:59] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

⁹³ mistakes

⁹⁴ weaknesses

⁹⁵ say that something is not true

⁹⁶ existing for a long time

⁹⁷ advancing gradually

⁹⁸ without supporting any particular side, objectively

⁹⁹ in a fair and just way



[00:21:03] Is there a national [broadcaster](#) in your country? If so, who pays for it, and how?

[00:21:09] What do you think organisations like the BBC should do in the era of Netflix and Amazon Prime?

[00:21:15] And finally, perhaps most importantly, are you a fan of The Great British Bake Off, and if so, can you please explain to me why?

[00:21:24] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:21:35] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:21:40] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Funded	provided with money
Institution	an important organisation
Broadcasting	having a television or radio presentation
Stand for	represent
Broadcaster	something that provides a television or radio presentation
Provision	the act of providing something, offering
Impartial	not supporting any particular side, objective
Distinctive	characteristic, easy to recognise
Outputs	amounts of products
Key	something important in order to understand something
Core	centre, base
Humble	not large, modest
Gigantic	extremely large



Broadcasts	presentations on radio or television
Faithfully	in a way that can be trusted
Diligently	in a careful way
Broadcast	provided
Obligation	something that is required because it is the right thing to do
Impartially	without favouring one thing more than another
Fee	payment
Controversy	disagreement
Tuning in	turning on the TV
Programme	a presentation of something on TV
Police	cause something to happen by necessity, regulate
Enforce	cause something to happen by necessity or make sure that it happens
Essentially	basically, in effect
Entitlement	the right to do something
Subject to	affected by



Complaints	expressions of disapproval
Complaining	saying that something is wrong
Offensive	causing someone to be offended, annoyed or upset
Envious	wishing they had what it had
Potentially	possibly
Implications	consequences
Programmes	presentations on TV
Grant	an amount of money given by the government for a particular purpose
Output	products
Dissect	examine in detail
Welfare	well-being
Distinction	difference
Extra-marital	outside of marriage
Renewed	having been resumed, started again
Scrutiny	careful and detailed examination



Alleged	said without giving proof
Serving	providing a service to
Bias	supporting something or someone because of personal reasons and not because it is fair
Concealing	hiding
Aired	presented on TV
Political spectrum	range of political opinions
Pledging	formally promising
Criticised	receiving negative judgements
Liberal	promoting socially progressive or new ideas
Metropolitan	having education, money and living in the large cities
Conservative-leaning	promoting traditional ideas
Biased	supporting something or someone because of personal reasons and not because it is fair
Interviewees	people who answer the questions during an interview
Ensure	make something certain to happen



Beg the question	cause an obvious question
Airtime	the amount of time something is on TV
Niche	interesting for only a small, specialised section of the population
Extremism	extreme ideas or views
Platform	base for them to stand and grow
Radical	representing extreme changes
Duty	responsibility
Serve	provide a service to
Served	provided a service
Critics	people who say that they don't approve of something
Caution	care to avoid mistakes
Noble	showing qualities of honesty, fairness and bravery
Ridicule	expressions used in order to make fun of something
Politically correct	avoiding the expression of ideas that may upset or insult someone
Offending	upsetting or insulting



Overview	a short description
Appeal	the quality of being attractive or interesting
Non-stop	without stopping, continuously
Concerns	things to worry about
Allegedly	without being sure that it happened
Switched off	turned off
Rudely	not in a polite way
Interrupted	stopped by something
Play down	represent something as being less important than it is
Urban myth	a humorous story that is being told without being true
Endearing	sweet and likeable
Competes	tries to be as (or more) successful as others in the same field
Well-oiled	operating successfully
Compelling	very interesting
Petitions	requests



Abolish	put an end to
Fund	provide with money for a particular purpose
Existence	the fact of something being, existing
Define	to say what its meaning is
Funding	providing with money for a particular purpose
Faults	mistakes
Imperfections	weaknesses
Deny	say that something is not true
Enduring	existing for a long time
Encroaching	advancing gradually
Impartiality	without supporting any particular side, objectively
Fairly	in a fair and just way

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

