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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

BBC gets out of the kitchen as government turns up the heat

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More than 11,000 recipes will go in the bin as the BBC drops its much-loved Food site. BBC

I suppose it says a lot about our current national obsession with all matters gastronomic that the focal point of media attention concerning the BBC's decision to "redefine" its online presence centres around the decision to take down its food website.

But it also says a lot for the power of social media that, within hours of the announcement, BBC management went back on its plan to bin more than 11,000 recipes, announcing that the bulk of them would instead be moved to its commercial BBC Good Food website which will remain open for business. What really appears to have angered the 120,000 or so people who signed a [change.org](#) petition calling for the decision to be reversed is the unnecessary attack on such an altruistic, beneficial and tangible example of public service provision.

According to Lloyd Shepherd, who was instrumental in conceptualising and creating the original food site, public service responsibilities were uppermost in the minds of those at the forefront of development. As he writes, the recipes posted had already been paid for by the licence fee payer and could be used for very little further cost. Added to this the fact that nutrition has become a public health issue and there is a role to play in the BBC publicising and helping to combat obesity issues.

As the text from the change petition states:

When the government is trying to promote healthy eating, surely it is madness to remove such a comprehensive archive which has taken years to create ... This is a much loved and used website and a precious resource for people across the country providing easy, free and importantly independent information on a vast range of foods and recipe options. The database provides inspiration for those with a few ingredients to come up with meal ideas and cook from scratch.

Could this be, as many journalists have already pointed out, the catalyst which rouses from slumber into open revolt those members of the public previously indifferent the future of the corporation?



John Prescott 
@johnprescott 

Take one online petition. Now add 1m angry people who want a BBC free of Tory & Murdoch interference.
change.org/p/bbc-save-the... #bbcrecipes

Sign the Petition
Save the BBC's recipe archive!
 change.org

8:31 AM · May 17, 2016 

 537  729 people are Tweeting about this

If the reaction on Twitter is anything to go by the BBC realised that if, come June, middle-class cooks up and down the country searching for BBC recipes collectively received the 404 Not Found Error message there would be a spectacular and simultaneous combustion which would not have been a pretty sight.

Slicing and dicing

Flippancy aside, this is clearly about much more than recipes. As part of the plan to implement cuts and address government concern that the BBC is “unfairly competing with commercial online publishers”, the head of BBC news and current affairs James Harding announced that, subject to approval and in order to save around £15m, Radio 1’s Newsbeat, the iWonder service, the travel website and the local news indexes for more than 40 geographical areas around the UK will all close. BBC online news also announced, separately, that plans are afoot to merge the News Channel with the BBC’s international 24-hour television news service.

These measures must of course be seen in the context of the recent government White Paper on the future of the BBC where the culture secretary, John Whittingdale, spoke of the BBC’s plans to reduce magazine-style content in online services. The focus should be, said Whittingdale, on “rigorous, impartial analysis of important news events and current affairs”.

Whittingdale was quick to distance himself from the gathering storm. Within hours of the announcement, he told a conference of the radio industry body RadioCentre’s that it is not his job to tell the BBC whether or not to put recipes up on its websites. Instead he alluded to the fact that the BBC had reacted to vigorous pressure from certain sections of the press calling for action on the BBC’s expansion into online “lifestyle content”.

Pressure cooker

Well, “vigorous pressure” from the government and press combined has been a feature of the BBC’s history and its certainly true that in September 2015 the New Media Association, the trade body of the UK press, pleaded that the BBC’s burgeoning digital presence was damaging the business interests of commercial operators. As reported in the Guardian, in its submission to the BBC’s Charter review, the association recommended specific controls on BBC online and fundamentally disagreed with the BBC’s ambitions to expand its online provision. For those that see the hand of Murdoch in these things it will come as no surprise to learn that the association’s chair is Mike Darcey, who is also a former chief executive of The Sun and Times publisher, News UK.



Billy Bragg 
@billybragg



Wonder why there's all this fuss about BBC recipes? It's the front line in the battle against Murdoch
twitter.com/MxJackMonroe/s...

11:56 AM · May 17, 2016



BBC bashing is of course the perennial sport of The Sun and Times and some, including singer and activist Billy Bragg, see the furore over recipes as a significant moment in the “battle against Murdoch” and by extension against the government’s sustained attacks on the ethos and existence of the BBC.

For News UK it is business as usual. As the news of the closures was breaking Press Gazette reported that the News Corp-owned website Heat Street had revealed the names of 41 BBC stars it believes are paid more than the prime minister’s £150,000 salary.

A number of food and recipe websites are waiting in the wings to launch. Two of them – as one blogger has already noted, Taste and Bestrecipe, have the same names as websites in Australia owned by – you guessed it – the Murdochs. But that’s just coincidence, obviously.



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