

Dr Samir Shah CBE,
BBC Chair, and members of the BBC Board,
(Sent via email: samir.shah@bbc.co.uk)

10 March 2025

Dear Samir Shah, and members of the BBC Board,

As historians and researchers who have made extensive use of the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham we feel compelled to express our deep concern about changes to access to the BBC's history.

The BBC Written Archives are a unique social, political and cultural resource, and it is vital that they be recognised and cherished as such. They are essential not only for academics working on broadcasting history, but also to those exploring the social and political histories of Britain, the Empire and Commonwealth, and our relationships with the wider world, and including questions related to technology and security. They are an invaluable source for historians exploring music, literature, performance and much more across the past century, as well as the life histories of significant creative figures and of an extraordinarily diverse range of other individuals.

The Archives were paid for by the public's licence fees across that century, and open access to them, within appropriate compliance frameworks, must be maintained. Transparency in their operation is also essential so that researchers have clarity for their immediate requests and long-term planning.

We have the greatest respect for the knowledge and commitment of those who work at and oversee the Centre, but we have been troubled that access to its records has become progressively more problematic over the past two years, with a severe reduction in available appointments and increasingly long times to secure copyright permissions. Members of the public can also no longer submit individual enquiries, which is a significant change that, like others, has been made without consultation.

A substantial proportion of the written archives (one estimate is two-thirds) has not been cleared for use by researchers, but until November 2023 it was possible to request files to be vetted, redacted if necessary, and then made available. This service, carried out efficiently and sensitively by archivists, was fundamental for original research into BBC history and consideration of countless other topics.

Since then access to unvetted files has stopped. We were informed that this was temporary for an audit of the holdings, but last month, again without consultation, researchers began to be told that the restriction was now fixed policy for the foreseeable future, and have been receiving this e-mail response to their enquiries:

Following a team restructure we have made some changes to the services we can offer our external users. From January 2025 we're unable to answer any personal interest enquiries, supply copies of documents or undertake any research on behalf of external users. For external users who meet our access criteria, we'll only be able to offer access to materials that have previously been opened for external research.

The effect of this is that the writing of the BBC's history is frozen in the form in which it has been chronicled to date. Diverse and inclusive histories of the Corporation will no longer be possible to research, and, most significantly, countless tales of non-elite, non-white, non-male and non-heteronormative programme makers and contributors will be inaccessible, possibly for ever. The impact on researchers working in fields adjacent to broadcasting history, including many from overseas, will be similarly devastating.

Some researchers, however, have more recently received a differently worded auto-reply:

New releases will be made periodically and will be based on business priorities and resource availability which are both subject to change.

The lack of precision and clarity in this statement is almost as problematic as the first policy. There is no commitment to a timetable; to the extent of the new clearances; to responsiveness to applications; or to the basis on which the clearances are to be made. Moreover, this has been removed from subsequent auto-replies, which has only added to the confusion and concern amongst the research community.

The damaging effect of this uncertainty is that we can no longer make plans for the publication of articles, for the writing of books, for the initiation of PhDs or other scholarly projects, or for the research to underpin radio and television programmes. A significant number of us are now uncertain as to whether we can proceed with contracted books, and all of us are unclear about whether new initiatives can be embarked upon. Just as significantly, projects previously agreed, with funding in place and staff contracted, are placed in jeopardy.

As historians and as citizens we are acutely mindful of, and sympathetic towards, the challenges faced by the BBC, the calamitous funding constraints and the deep cuts already made and those likely still to come. But we believe that a rigorous and complex understanding of the organisation's history, its achievements, and its values is a key part of making the case for the Corporation's continued existence as an organisation committed to public service ideals.

Without continuing access to the Written Archives, on a transparent basis, it is impossible for us to work as responsible researchers and unfeasible for us to share our enhanced understanding of the history that we uncover – which we do at no cost to the BBC. All our labour is paid for by our employers and funders, or simply by ourselves.

As Charter Review approaches, we call on the BBC Board to publish a code of practice affirming continuing access and the timely vetting of files to ensure that all those who care, personally and professionally, about the Corporation's distinguished past can have the confidence to research and reveal the full range of its stories for its future.

signed by Professor John Wyver, Dr Kate Murphy and Ian Greaves
on behalf of the 175 historians and researchers whose names and affiliations are attached

Signed by

Dr Mark Aldridge, Solent University
Dr Sarah Arnold, Maynooth University
Dr Steve Arnold, independent researcher, founder of Radio Circle
Dr Gurvinder Aujla-Sidhu, University of Derby
Professor Todd Avery, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Dr Alec Badenoch, Utrecht University
Dr Alexander Balfour, University of East Anglia
Professor Christina Baade, McMaster University
Dr Vicky Ball, De Montfort University
Dr Jeannine Baker, University of Newcastle, Australia
Dr Steven Barclay, independent researcher
Dr Jane Barnwell, University of Westminster
Dr Christine Becker, University of Notre Dame
Dr Erin Bell, University of Lincoln
Professor Jessica Berman, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Dr Carolyn Birdsall, University of Amsterdam
Professor Jonathan Bignell, University of Reading
Professor William Boddy, Baruch College, City University of New York
Dr Tim Boon, Science Museum Group
Stephen Bourne, independent scholar
Professor Charlotte Brunson (Emerita), University of Warwick
Dr Mhairi Brennan, Aston University
David Brunt, independent researcher
Dr Joanna Bullivant, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
Dr David Butler, University of Manchester
Dr Laura Calkins, Texas Tech University
Dr Laura Carter, Université Paris Cité
Dr Llewella Chapman, University of East Anglia
Professor Hugh Chignell (Emeritus), Bournemouth University
Dr Jonathan Clinch, Royal Academy of Music
Professor Debra Rae Cohen (Emerita), University of South Carolina
Deborah Cohen, independent researcher
Professor John Cook, Glasgow Caledonian University
Dr Glenda Cooper, City St George's
Dr Tony Coult, independent scholar
Simon Coward, Kaleidoscope
Dr Pedro Cravinho, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
Lillian Crawford, post graduate researcher, Royal Holloway
Oliver Crocker, independent researcher
Professor Tim Crook (Emeritus), Goldsmiths, University of London
Katie Crosson, Royal Holloway, University of London
Dr Julie Cyzewski, Murray State University
Dipali Das, Edge Hill University
Jon Dear, writer
Dr Richard Dhillon, University of Warwick
Professor Renee Dickason, University of Rennes
Professor Christopher Dingle, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
Dr Jenny Doctor, University of Cincinnati

Professor Tony Dowmunt (Emeritus), Goldsmiths, University of London
Professor John Ellis (Emeritus), Royal Holloway, University of London
Simon Farquhar, independent researcher
Mike Flood Page, Royal Holloway, University of London
Professor Des Freedman, Goldsmiths, University of London
Dr Kevin Geddes, Queen Margaret University
Dr Amy Genders, University of West of England
Professor Christine Geraghty (Emeritus), University of Glasgow
Professor Marie Gillespie, The Open University
Dr Vana Goblot, Goldsmiths, University of London
Adam Gotch, former BBC librarian
Professor Jean-Baptiste Gouyon, University College London
Ian Greaves, independent researcher
Simon Guerrier, freelance writer and producer
Dr Kate Guthrie, University of Bristol
Toby Hadoke, broadcaster, writer and television historian
Dr David Haignon, University of Rennes
Dr Alexander Hall, McMaster University
Dr Nick Hall, Royal Holloway, University of London
Dr Sheldon Hall, Sheffield Hallam University
Professor Esther Império Hamburger, University of Sao Paolo
Professor Ben Harker, University of Manchester
Jason Hazeley, writer
Dr Jo Henderson, University of West London
Dr Richard Hewett, University of the Arts London
Professor John Hill, Royal Holloway, University of London
Professor Michele Hilmes (Emerita), University of Wisconsin-Madison
Dr Lottie Hoare, University of Cambridge
Dr Christopher Hogg, University of Westminster
Professor Su Holmes, University of East Anglia
David J Howe, Independent researcher
Professor Jason Jacobs, University of Brisbane
Paul R Jackson, author and television archivist
Dr Vanessa Jackson, Birmingham City University
Dr Freya Jarman, University of Liverpool
Dr Derek Johnston, Queen's University, Belfast
Dr Gordon Johnston, University of Edinburgh
Professor James Jordan, University of Southampton
Professor Anne Karpf, London Metropolitan University
Paul Kerensa, independent scholar
Dr Gloria Khamkar, Bournemouth University
Michael Klontzas, Goldsmiths, University of London
Dr David Kynaston, historian
Professor Kate Lacey, University of Sussex
Dame Hermione Lee, literary biographer
Dr Valerie Langfield, independent scholar
Dr Alexandra Lawrie, University of Edinburgh
Spencer Leigh, writer and broadcaster
Dr Jan Lewis, Bournemouth University
Justin Lewis, writer

Mark Lewisohn, popular culture historian
Dr Eleni Liarou, Birbeck, University of London
Rev'd Dr Matthew Linfoot, University of Westminster
Dr Justine Lloyd, Macquarie University
Dr Aasiya Lodhi, University of Westminster
Dr Max Long, University of Cambridge
Dr Victorian Lowe, University of Manchester
Dr Liam McCarthy, University of Leicester
Miranda McLachlan, Goldsmiths, University of London
Professor Peter Mandler, University of Cambridge
Dr Chris Marshall, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire
Richard Marson, writer
Dr Tom May, Northumbria University
Professor Jamie Medhurst, Aberystwyth University
Professor Joe Moran, Liverpool John Moores University
Professor Emilie Morin, University of York
Professor Daniel Ryan Morse, University of Nevada, Reno
Professor Rachel Moseley, University of Warwick
Dr Kate Murphy, Bournemouth University
Professor Colleen Murrell, Dublin City University
Andy Neill independent researcher
Dr Trevor R Nelson, Wichita State University
Dr. Michael Niblett, University of Warwick
Professor Siân Nicholas (Emerita), Aberystwyth University
Dr Caitriona Noonan, Cardiff University
Pete Paphides, writer and broadcaster
Professor Stephen Parker, St Mary's University, London
Chris Perry, CEO, Kaleidoscope
Professor Vike Plock, University of Exeter
Dr Laraine Porter, De Montfort University
Professor Simon Potter, University of Bristol
Dr Elain Price, Swansea University
Dr Hollie Price, Keele University
Professor James Procter, Newcastle University
Professor Jennifer Purcell, St Michael's College, Vermont
Dr Maria Rikitienskaia, Regent's University, London
Dr Rebecca Roach, University of Birmingham
Gavin Rymill, freelance writer and researcher
Dr Michael Samuel, University of Bristol
Dr Emma Sandon, Birkbeck, University of London
Professor Graham Saunders, University of Birmingham
Professor Robert Savage, Boston College
Professor Eric Saylor, Drake University, Des Moines
Professor Jean Seaton, Director, Orwell Foundation
Michael Seeley, independent researcher
Dr Melanie Selfe, University of Glasgow
Dr Kristin Skoog, Bournemouth University
Dr Billy Smart, independent researcher
Dr Andrea Smith, University of Sussex
Andrew T Smith, independent researcher

Professor Justin Smith, De Montfort University
Phyll Smith, University of East Anglia
Professor Jennifer Smyth, University of Warwick
Professor Andrew Spicer, University of West of England
Professor Jeanette Steemers, King's College, London
Professor Tony Stoller CBE, Bournemouth University
Professor Catherine Tackley, University of Liverpool
Dr Julia Taylor, Bournemouth University
Dr Kate Terkanian, Bournemouth University
Professor Rosie Thomas, University of Westminster
Simon Vaughan, Alexandra Palace Television Society
Dr Justin Vickers, Illinois State University
Stephen James Walker, independent researcher
Professor Tim Wall, Birmingham City University
Dr Richard Wallace, University of Warwick
Professor Paul Watt, University of Adelaide
Dr Alban Webb, University of Sussex
Dr Elke Weissmann, Edge Hill University
Dr Anne-Katrin Weber, University of Lausanne
Professor Helen Wheatley, University of Warwick
Keith Wickham, producer and researcher
John Williams, independent researcher
Dr Nerys Williams, University College, Dublin
Dr Non Williams, Swansea University
Ashley Wood, independent researcher
Professor John Wyver, University of Westminster