

BBC Trust Review of the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the Arab Spring: follow up report

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Background	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Trust Commentary	1
Executive Report on Arab Spring Review Actions	1
Improving our knowledge	3
Analytical coverage	4
BBC-1 bulletins	5
Cross-trailing & the web	6
User generated content	7
Middle East Editor	8

Trust Commentary

In the two years since the BBC Trust commissioned a review of the impartiality of BBC coverage of the events known as the 'Arab Spring', the story has continued to evolve and has remained one of the most significant and complex covered by BBC journalists today. The Trust is aware that bringing back the story has meant exposing journalists and other BBC staff to great danger and difficulty, whilst also requiring a distillation and analysis of events happening, often simultaneously and almost daily, in a whole range of countries. The Trust is grateful to the Executive for the appreciable efforts which have been made since the review was published in 2012. Much progress has been achieved and the Trust is confident that the changes made mean that progress is likely to continue.

The Trust chose the subject for review because of its importance and because of the complexity of deciding how to organise impartial coverage in a fast-moving story. Current events in Egypt demonstrate the importance of covering that particular story well and in-depth and the Trust welcomes the upgrading of the sponsored reporter's post in Cairo to that of full correspondent.

The Trust is pleased to note several actions undertaken by the Executive to help ensure coverage of the region is as comprehensive as possible, both in terms of the countries being covered and in examination of the various voices and factions within those countries. Such Executive actions include the use of "stand-back moments" at News Group Board and the regular attendance at that board of the Middle East Editor, Jeremy Bowen, as well as the use of an electronic grid to record reporting and to plan coverage.

The Trust considers that the use of a "story champion" for Syria is an example of action which will improve consideration of significant, long-running stories. The Trust also welcomes the efforts made to increase the level of knowledge across the BBC, such as the seminars to bring in a range of outside opinions and the detailed analysis provided by BBC News Analysis & Research and available to staff online.

In his report, Edward Mortimer said the BBC could include a broader range of international reaction to developments in the Middle East, adding to the impressive amount of coverage of the reaction from US, France and UK. The Trust

considers the Executive may wish to reflect on ways in which such reaction could be included more regularly.

Since the review was published, the BBC has adopted new wording for all user-generated footage where independent verification has not been possible and the Trust considers this will help the audience understand the vetting process to which all such content is subjected.

The audience research conducted for the review in 2011 showed the reliance that engaged members of the audience, particularly younger members, were putting on the web. The Trust welcomes the increase in cross-trailing from broadcast to online content, particularly that directed at programmes – such as Radio 1's Newsbeat or the Asian Network - which attract younger audiences.

BBC One bulletins have less time than many other programmes to cover the full range of countries and to explain stories in depth. The Trust welcomes the BBC's statement that they continue to aim high, within those constraints. The Trust is particularly pleased to note the series of special reports for the News at Ten which marked the second anniversary of the uprisings in December 2012.

The Trust notes that the BBC's use of "stand-back moments" and "story champions" as described above also formed part of the BBC Executive's response to the Trust's review of the breadth of opinion reflected in BBC output, published in July 2013. The Trust welcomes the BBC's development of tools to improve its strategic oversight of coverage and notes that it will be receiving an update from the Executive on the use of such tools, as outlined in its response to the Breadth of Opinion review, in summer 2014.

Background

The 2012 review of the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the 'Arab Spring' was the fourth in a series of Trust impartiality reviews which are designed to help the Trust do all it can to ensure the BBC is maintaining the highest standards of impartiality and accuracy. The Trust's review was led by Edward Mortimer, then Senior Vice President of the Salzburg Global Seminar and an expert in Middle East affairs. His report, alongside the Trust Conclusions, a response from the BBC Executive and the audience and content research conducted for the review, were published in June 2012 and can be found here:

Executive Report on Arab Spring Review Actions

Improving our knowledge

1. Our aim has been to broaden the level of knowledge within the organisation. To this end, we have focused on the role played by the BBC News Analysis & Research department, which has so far organised two seminars to help to introduce our news and current affairs journalists to the views of outside experts.
2. The first seminar, in March, examined Salafism and political Islam in post-revolutionary Egypt. The guests were two Salafi politicians: Tamer Meky, from the Al-Asala party and a member of the Upper House in Egypt's parliament, and Mohammad Okda, from the al-Watan party, who sits on the party's Economic Affairs Committee and assists in the formation of its foreign policy. The second seminar, in April, took a detailed look at the different jihadist groups within the Syrian opposition with Noman Benotman from the Quilliam Foundation and Raffaello Pantucci of the Royal United Services Institute.
3. We have also highlighted the Analysis & Research website as a resource for journalists, particularly the 'In depth' page on Syria. Detailed explanations of the situation in any given country are posted in morning and afternoon bulletins to BBC journalists.
4. At News Editorial Board, we have begun to introduce 'stand back' items to help shape our coverage. For example, in November we noted the political impact of Egypt's economic problems and the issue of security in Tripoli, where militias and traditional tribal notables had filled a power vacuum. In April, we focused on the support President Assad enjoys from minority groups in Syria (including his own Alawites, some Christians and Kurds) and from Iran and Russia.
5. As promised, we have upgraded the post of sponsored reporter in Cairo to a full correspondent's role and interviews for the appointment are imminent.
6. We decided that the duty of being a 'story champion' should be carried out by people whose jobs mean they are closely involved in the story. We wanted them to have the journalistic authority to shape the coverage, and did not wish to add to the workload of journalists whose roles would not naturally demand such a level of involvement. A foreign editor was therefore responsible for shaping our coverage of Syria. He co-ordinated coverage, and monitored the competition across the industry, driving fresh material on air and suggesting a

wide range of interviewees to programmes from across the spectrum. He was also responsible for helping to arrange our undercover trips into Syria.

7. Our work was recognised when BBC News won the RTS international award for its Syria coverage. Correspondent Ian Pannell and cameraman Darren Conway also won the prestigious American 'David Bloom Award' for their work reporting from Idlib last year. They spent two weeks with opposition groups in Syria. Their reports from this period included an examination of the evolving tactics being employed by Syrian rebels within the region.

Analytical coverage

8. We have also established an electronic grid to record our reporting and plan future coverage, helping us co-ordinate and shape coverage on a clearer basis.
9. On longer form daily news programmes, analytical coverage has, we believe, grown in strength. For Today, Yolande Knell reported on how Egypt has changed two years on from the uprising. For WATO and PM, Hugh Sykes reported from Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia. More widely, the World Tonight (27 November 2012) examined the impact of international sanctions on Iran's economy, while Imogen Foulkes reported from Tunisia on the struggle for human rights. Katy Watson reported on Saudi Arabia's plans to avoid unrest and on the influence of Qatar. The World This Weekend analysed the prospects for democracy after the assassination of the opposition leader Shokri Belaeed (10 February 2013). Newsnight reported from Baghdad on ethnic tensions (22 November).
10. In current affairs, Radio 4's Analysis considered the consequences for Arab society of a new culture in which ordinary people openly question those in authority - not just in the political sphere but within the family and religious realm too (12 November). On 4 February, Owen Bennett Jones investigated the Alawis' origins, history and culture. On 4 March, the programme investigated the Muslim Brotherhood's support across the Sunni Muslim world and the influence of its founding branch in Egypt. Crossing Continents examined the aftermath of the Libyan civil war (13 December).
11. On BBC-2, John Ware reported on how Israel had responded to the Arab Spring (April). In 'The Saudi Story' Frank Gardner returned to Saudi Arabia (March) to question the idea that the whole Arab region was consumed by a desire for western-style democracy. For Panorama (18 March) Peter Taylor reported on the faulty intelligence that justified the invasion of Iraq.
12. On BBC World News, *Hardtalk* has fielded an impressive range of interviewees. Stephen Sackur spoke to Egypt's Prime Minister Hisham Qandil and asked if the

new Egyptian government is living up to the promise of the Tahrir revolution (November 2012). The programme also spoke to Syria's former Prime Minister, Riyad Hijab, and to Naguib Sawiris, a leading member of Egypt's liberal and secular elite, to ask whether the country is becoming polarised between Islamist and secularist forces. The former Bahraini MP, Jalal Fairouz, from the main opposition Shia political group Alwefaq, was asked if the authorities in Bahrain had learned any lessons from their suppression of anti-government protests (December).

- 13.** For *This World*, Dan Snow showed how Syria's history is shaping the current civil war, unpicking the divisions between Sunnis and Alawites, Islamists and secularists, east and west.
- 14.** BBC World Service English has broadcast fifteen separate radio documentaries on developments in the Middle East since November last year. A widely praised series 'Egypt's Challenge' examined the state of the country including its economy, security forces, the impact of the revolution on rural life, and the thoughts of the next generation. Other programmes analysed Iraq after Saddam, Libya after the revolution, and the legacy of outgoing Iranian President Ahmadinejad.
- 15.** Examples of BBC Arabic programmes since November 2012 include: Reporting for Bashar (24 December 2012): this film examined the allegation that the Syrian government funded TV station Al Ikhbaria was a propaganda arm of the government. BBC Arabic gained unprecedented access to show a very different perspective from inside the station. Syrian Women (14 January 2013): filmed mostly by the women themselves over seven months, this documentary provided a unique insight into how the conflict had transformed their lives. My Neighbour, My Enemy (21 January): with access to both sides of the frontline in Lebanon, this documentary explored the lives of two communities caught up in sectarian violence in Tripoli as the Syrian civil war spilled over the border.
- 16.** Much of the above output is shared across different networks or programmes (for example, Our World is run on both BBC World and the BBC News Channel) and the Impact team helps to co-ordinate coverage: for example, Peter Taylor reported for Today, Five Live, BBC World, World Service radio, GNS, and the Six & Ten, on his Panorama investigation into intelligence ahead of the Iraq war.

BBC-1 bulletins

- 17.** BBC-1 bulletins face the challenge of covering world events and explaining their causes while battling against the constraints of their relatively short running time. They continue to try to aim high.

- 18.** In December, the Ten marked the second anniversary of the uprisings with a week of special reports. George Alagiah reported and presented the Ten from Cairo, on fresh dissent in Egypt. Lyse Doucet returned to Tunisia, where the initial uprising began, and Jeremy Bowen reported from Bahrain on the continuing challenges there. In the final programme of the series, on 12 December, Fergal Keane reported on refugees at the Jordanian/Syrian border, Ian Pannell reported from Aleppo, and Jeremy Bowen was in Damascus, where he interviewed the deputy foreign minister – a rare chance to hear at length the government's case.
- 19.** Since the turn of the year, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Israel and Turkey have all featured prominently on the Ten, including Lyse Doucet's recent exclusive reports from Qusair.

Cross-trailing & the web

- 20.** We continue to direct audiences towards more detailed coverage on BBC News Online.
- 21.** For example, the Ten's week of anniversary reports all pointed to background information on the web. BBC Arabic regularly trails BBC Arabic Online from its main bulletins. Other examples of Online coverage which were cross-trailed have been noted by the Social News team, which takes a lead role in overseeing the procedure. They include:

Syria: Mapping the conflict (an interactive map). The conflict in Syria has made it extremely difficult to assess who is in control where.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22798391>

When the BBC discovered evidence of a massacre at a village just outside the central Syrian city of Homs in January, those on both sides of the conflict blamed each other for the atrocity. What really happened? Click on the map below to find out what the BBC team found and what military and forensic experts have discovered from the satellite imagery and video footage.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21291714>

Israel's military offensive against Gaza - a guide to some of the key issues involved. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20388298>

We have encouraged references to the BBC website on outlets which attract younger audiences. Both the Asian Network (target audience 15-34) and Radio 1 Newsbeat trail to the website.

Examples include:

Explained: Why there are angry demonstrations in Egypt:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/12299306>

Does Syria have WMDs? <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/18869648>

Newsbeat also produces its own guides to the region, which it has trailed:

Algeria: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/21057309>

Syria: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/20930975>

Bahrain: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/17781306>

The Arab League: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/16759134>

User generated content

22. The UGC Hub, based in the newsroom, has continued to discover, verify and distribute a range of material across all outlets. Examples of the Hub's work include:

- Footage of the upsurge in fighting in the strategic Syrian town of Qusair, ahead of its taking by government forces, which resulted in this online story and a Jim Muir two-way: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22667595>
- Footage of the aftermath of an apparent massacre in the town of Baniyas, which resulted in this online story and a Jim Muir two-way: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-22398831>
- Alerting BBC News to footage of a rebel commander allegedly eating the organs of a dead government soldier. This was used in this Jim Muir report after newsgathering obtained independent confirmation of the identity of the commander: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22519770>

- 23.** Conversely, the Hub stopped output from running footage claiming to show a rebel fighter being killed while attempting to save a girl caught in crossfire. Analysis of the video and consultation with BBC Monitoring raised doubts about the location and date of the incident. Since the Mortimer report, the Hub has adopted this wording for all footage where independent verification has not been possible: *"We are confident this footage is genuine, but because of its nature and source, we cannot be certain. Any use MUST include cautionary wording in cues/scripts/astons/captions, such as: 'The BBC has not been able to fully authenticate this footage, but based on additional checks made on it, it is believed to be genuine'."* Programmes script UGC material with an appropriate level of caution. Ian Pannell reported (16 May): "A local activist gave us this footage. He says it was taken as the shells landed. We can't verify these images but all the videos you are going to see were apparently taken on the same day by different people we met."
- 24.** BBC Arabic receives, daily, large amounts of footage from various opposition sources, most carrying their logos. If it is aired, UGC is clearly labelled as material distributed by activists or opposition groups. BBC Arabic's Syrian and Lebanese journalists play a crucial role in verifying the footage and checking the sources. For example, in Saudi Arabia, demonstrations in Brida, Altief and in the Eastern Province, after the arrest of Sheikh Al-Qahtani, were checked by our Saudi journalists and labelled as activist footage.

Middle East Editor

- 25.** The Middle East editor has attended News Board to provide his analysis of future stories and themes, and his reflections on past coverage. This has, we believe, enabled us to set coverage priorities each quarter. As with other editors, he also helps to guide coverage internally through his published Online journalism.
- 26.** Bowen, Lyse Doucet and Ian Pannell have all used social media to answer audience questions via Twitter and Facebook, a direct way of adding the analysis and explanation audiences seek. For example:

As Syrians mark two years since the start of the uprising BBC Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen @BowenBBC answered your questions in a live Twitter Q&A.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21800646>