

# A BBC Trust Review of the Breadth of Opinion Reflected in the BBC's Output

July 2013

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# BBC TRUST CONCLUSIONS

## Summary

The BBC has a position of great trust in the eyes of licence fee payers. Its journalistic mission is to provide audiences with the accurate and impartial information they need to be able to form their own views on the issues that shape public policy and their own lives. The right to freedom of expression is not only about the right to express views. It is about the right to receive views. Listening to other people's views and deciding what to accept, what to reject and what to actively challenge is fundamental to a healthy democratic society. The BBC's journalists and content producers play a vital role every day in bringing views we would not otherwise hear into our lives. The Trust wants those who work for the BBC to feel that they can and must aspire to search out those whose opinions may impact upon society, even those which are unpalatable, and bring them to licence fee payers. Hand in hand with that goes the duty to set opinions in sufficient context and give them due weight.

The Trust decided in summer 2012 to launch a review of the breadth of opinion reflected in BBC output. Five years before, the Trust had published John Bridcut's report on impartiality, *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel*, which said, among other things, that impartiality was about a spectrum of opinion rather than a simple question of left and right. The Trust considered it an appropriate time to examine how the BBC's provision of breadth of opinion – a commitment unique to the BBC – had evolved since then.

In summary, the Trust's conclusions are:

- The breadth of opinion reflected in BBC output is remarkable and impressive. BBC programme makers are generally well aware of the need to include as wide a range of opinion as they can and that it is central to delivery of impartial content.
- The Trust is pleased to note that the majority of those in the audience research felt that they heard their own views on BBC output, thought the BBC delivered a good range of opinion and that it was impartial.
- The content analysis identified a slight increase in the breadth of opinion provided in the three subject areas of religion and belief, immigration and the UK's relationship to the EU between the periods sampled in 2007 and 2012. However, there has not been a substantial evolution in the BBC's provision of breadth of opinion in the six years since the Bridcut report. This is partly because programme makers were already putting Bridcut's principles into action when he wrote his report.
- The Trust welcomes Stuart Prebble's view that the move of several key programmes and Radio 5 Live to Salford should provide opportunities to broaden the BBC's approach to stories and issues.
- On the three specific topics the Trust welcomes Stuart Prebble's conclusion that:

- today's BBC gives due weight to all significant strands of opinion on the subject of immigration
- there is a wide and comprehensive range of information and viewpoints on the EU in various BBC on-air and online services
- the BBC's services of worship, news and analysis produced by its Religion and Ethics team is comprehensive and impressive.
- The Trust notes Stuart Prebble's description of a slowness in the past in accommodating opinion on immigration and the EU which politicians were uncomfortable in voicing.
- The Trust recognises that reporting on the views of the UK's elected representatives is a central part of the BBC's mission but expects the BBC to find ways of addressing opinion that has not emerged through Parliament or other formal institutions.
- The Trust welcomes the Executive's plans:
  - to establish a pan-BBC forum on religion and ethics and the research the BBC is undertaking to appraise the current mix of its religion content in the light of the 2011 census.
  - to ensure views gathered by the BBC's audience response team are more widely and systematically disseminated and it suggests the BBC might like to consider finding more ways of incorporating appropriate user generated content.
  - to appoint story champions for important and long-running stories and to create more space for editors to consider whether all relevant opinions have been included.
  - to expand its use of cross-trailing between programmes and online.

The Trust will welcome an update from the BBC's Editorial Director in summer 2014.

## Context

The BBC Trust represents licence fee payers in its oversight of the BBC. It listens to their opinions and expectations and uses them to inform its own decisions. The Agreement accompanying the BBC Charter specifies that we should do all we can "to ensure that controversial subjects are treated with due accuracy and impartiality" in our news and other output dealing with matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy. The Trust assesses the impartiality of BBC output through independently led reviews. These are underpinned by research as appropriate, in order to provide information to the Trust when holding the Executive to account for the impartiality of its services. Previous reviews have examined coverage of the events known as the Arab Spring, Science, network coverage of the UK nations, and business reporting. These reviews have been vital in leading to recognisable improvements in coverage for licence fee payers.

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines set out the standards expected of everyone making or presenting the BBC's output. As part of the principles laid out in the guidelines for

achieving impartiality, there is a commitment to reflect a wide range of opinion across our output as a whole and over an appropriate timeframe so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under-represented. It is this commitment to breadth of opinion that the Trust decided to test in its latest review of impartiality. It is a commitment unique to the BBC: other UK broadcasters are not required to provide breadth of opinion. This commitment is managed across services and platforms and not through any single programme or item of content.

The 2010 BBC Editorial Guidelines were approved by the Trust and followed the publication, in 2007, of a report by John Bridcut on safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century, together with extensive research on audience expectations and perceptions of impartiality.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/editorial\\_standards/impartiality/safeguarding\\_impartiality.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/safeguarding_impartiality.html)

The report, *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel*, contained 12 "guiding principles" to inform the BBC's approach to ensuring impartiality in the face of rapid technological and social change. The report suggested a new approach to achieving impartiality – likening it to a "wagon wheel" of opinions rather than the traditional "seesaw" of left versus right.

The continuing changes in British society meant, Bridcut wrote, that the parameters of "normality" and "extremism" had shifted. Impartiality involved space being provided for sometimes difficult views, if those views were rationally and honestly held and if all of them are subject to equal scrutiny. It was not the BBC's role to close down debate. Programme makers needed constantly to examine and challenge their own assumptions and the BBC to examine its own institutional values and the effect they had on its audiences.

Five years after publication of the Bridcut report, the Trust commissioned Stuart Prebble to lead an impartiality review on breadth of opinion and to assess whether the BBC's understanding of the concept of breadth of voice had evolved since 2007.

For the purposes of this project, three subject areas were examined particularly closely: religion and belief in the UK, the UK's relationship to the EU and immigration. The review was informed by Stuart Prebble's report, which incorporated his own insights as an experienced programme maker, together with invited submissions from, and interviews with, BBC staff and those with an interest and knowledge of the three main subject areas, and, of course, the content analysis conducted by Cardiff University and the audience research conducted by Oxygen Brand Consulting. The full content analysis and audience research, together with details of those who wrote to or met with Stuart Prebble, are published alongside this report.

## **Audience Research – summary**

The audience research was undertaken by Oxygen Brand Consulting. It can be found here:

[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our\\_work/breadth\\_opinion/audience\\_research.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/audience_research.pdf)

The BBC was felt by the vast majority of respondents, both from religious groups and non-believers, to deliver a reasonable breadth of opinion in religious coverage when taken over time and across the output. Overall, the BBC was also felt to be reasonably impartial in its coverage, although it was sometimes seen by the religious members of the audience as too secular in its approach to content rather than completely unbiased. The small minority who came to the research with an existing opinion that the BBC lacked impartiality in the main revised their opinion having looked at BBC output in detail.

There were two caveats about BBC impartiality in religion. Firstly, the BBC is sometimes seen by the very religious as "Secular" (by which they mean "non-religious") in its approach to content, rather than completely unbiased or neutral. Secondly, the UK media as a whole are felt to fall down on breadth of voice in their depiction of Muslims.

The audience felt that the context and framing of a news broadcast was key to deciding whether there was adequate breadth of opinion. It is also worth noting that, in the internet age, the timeframe for news in particular was felt to be "immediate". Therefore reporting at least two relevant sides of an argument on news and online was felt to be necessary from the break of a story. However, the audience was understanding about the time pressures involved in putting together a bulletin piece. Breadth of opinion comes across particularly clearly to the audience online.

However, the audience felt its experience of breadth of opinion could be hampered by executional factors such as editing or visual imagery: for example, a very emotional, visually exciting or disturbing news piece could overwhelm the range and content of arguments in the script.

More broadly, the public were looking to news and current affairs to increase their own understanding and help them form a view. Breadth of opinion is valuable in contributing to this, so the audience felt it gives more than "just impartiality". Related to this, within breadth of opinion, the audience was looking for more than just unfounded or emotional "opinions" but for informed and informing views representative of major strands of thought.

The BBC was felt by many respondents to make too much use of politicians as spokespeople. Audiences wanted to hear the views of "real people" whose real life experiences mirrored their own, and who could explain the issue at hand. The audience also expected their own view to be invited and fed back into the news stream, via comments on BBC websites. The audience in the research perceived that "comments" pages on BBC websites were less prominent than was the case for other broadcasters such as Sky.

One specific objective of the research was to investigate whether the audience felt that they heard their own views on the BBC, and if not whether they knew where to find them. Most said they heard their own views but they also wanted to hear *all* relevant and mainstream views on a topic, not just their own. However, where they perceived their position was not accurately presented in flagship programmes over a sustained period, some opted out from the BBC as a broadcaster and supplemented it with additional broadcast or online sources.

## Content Analysis – summary

The content analysis was undertaken by Cardiff University. It can be found here:

[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our\\_work/breadth\\_opinion/content\\_analysis.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/content_analysis.pdf)

The content analysis included a study of the breadth of opinion in the BBC's coverage of the three topics (Immigration, Religion in the UK and the UK's Relationship to Europe) in 2007 and in 2012, examining a range of news and current affairs programming, as well as online stories. A second part of the analysis looked at the breadth of topics and sources in selected news programmes from the BBC, ITV and Channel 4, in 2007 and 2012.

Traditionally, content analysis measures hard facts as opposed to something as nebulous as opinions. In this respect the content analysis undertaken for this review has been ambitious in trying to measure something new and something which is quite difficult to achieve. An innovation has been a "wagon wheel" of opinions, inspired by the Bridcut report, which has been applied to the three distinct story areas.

The focus of much hard news is on telling and explaining the story. This limits the amount of opinion which can be coded in research like this because there is less opinion and more story telling in a news item. It is also worth noting that Cardiff's analysis compared different stories in different years so the opinions being compared were different, with the results providing a "snapshot" of coverage rather than definitive conclusions.

Cardiff found no clear statistical evidence of a change of approach between 2007 and 2012 but there was a slight increase in the breadth of opinion across the years in the samples regarding the three topics. A significant finding of the content analysis was the dominance of political voices. Political voices have become more, not less, dominant in coverage of the EU and immigration between 2007 and 2012. There was, however, a large decline in the number of political voices used in stories about religion and belief. In coverage of the UK's relationship with Europe, the EU was found frequently to be framed as a problem. The number of stories on the EU increased in 2012.

The number of UKIP interviews was lower in the 2012 sample than in 2007. However, the analysis, which covered a period before the 2013 local elections and the rise in UKIP appearances associated with those elections, found that Eurosceptic views aligned with UKIP policies but expressed by non-UKIP politicians were amply represented.

Cardiff's report found the varied views on immigration broadly representative of views in England, Scotland and Wales, according to the British Social Attitudes survey. However, the report found that information and opinions provided through the immigration stories tended to focus on the specific case, rather than on the larger story of how immigration may affect British society for better or worse. Just as in the case of the EU debate, the broader context, in terms of both information and opinions, had limited presence.

The report found that coverage of Christianity was largely framed by debates within the Church of England, while the coverage of Islam was framed by negative debates *about* Islam. However, the stories sampled were very different and included the appointment of a new Archbishop of Canterbury. Even in 2007, when stories about the relationship

between Islam and terrorism were particularly salient, the most prominent opinions included in the story sampled represented a more rounded view of the problem.

## Stuart Prebble's Report – summary

Stuart Prebble argues that it is imperative we are exposed to views with which we do not agree. This, he believes, is fundamental to the BBC mission. He argues that the BBC must not only reflect the views of a wide range of people whose opinions might otherwise never be heard unless and until they make themselves impossible to ignore, but also present them in a way which will make us want to hear them. It is not enough, he writes, simply to provide a platform for views we might not instantly like. The BBC must also provide context so that the audience can be helped to understand the "difficult" proposition or point of view even if it is only so that we understand the proposition or point of view to which we are saying "No".

On the three topics examined in more depth: religion and belief; Britain's relationship with the EU; and immigration, Stuart Prebble found the BBC goes to great lengths to provide a breadth of opinion. There have been problems in the past and some are observable now but on the whole he notes an impressive range of opinions reflected by the BBC. On immigration, he describes a reluctance by mainstream politicians to raise the topic of immigration in the past despite the fact that it was a matter of widespread public concern. He cites the review's content analysis on the number of politicians used as sources on BBC output and says this reliance on politicians may well have led to the BBC previously missing wider concerns in the country at large. As the politicians became more willing to raise the subject, so it was heard more on the airwaves. Stuart Prebble notes the value of Radio 5 Live in providing real breadth of view. But he concludes that most interviews and debates arising from the agenda of daily politics will be to do with how we deal with issues arising from immigration policies, rather than the broader questions about curtailing immigration generally and this may mean, he suggests, that even today the debate on the BBC may not reflect the wider public mood.

Stuart Prebble argues that if the agenda driving News and Current Affairs can sometimes seem to favour mainstream politicians on the topic of immigration it may be even more so in the case of the UK's relationship with the EU. He notes the rise of the withdrawalist tendency in the UK and the case made by some, though denied by the BBC, that this argument has not been presented as often as it ought to have been. He praises Gavin Hewitt's blog, the BBC News Channel and online coverage for their breadth of view. He notes the BBC can and does point to an impressively wide range of programming in which it has examined the EU from different angles. With a complex subject in a complex world the mainstream bulletins and the Today programme can't do justice to the full range of information and opinion which deserves an airing, but "It is there if you want to find it".

Stuart Prebble notes that the BBC's coverage of religion is wide ranging and substantial. He touches on the arguments that secularists and humanists should be included in Radio 4's Thought for the Day. He notes that no religion complained to him about under-representation either on Thought for the Day or in terms of the provision of worship programmes. He considers the range and depth of factual programming striking and impressive. He questions whether minority religion is sometimes seen through the prism

of Christianity. He mentions concerns that some BBC journalists have gaps in their knowledge and says that any journalist employed by the BBC should be expected to have a basic knowledge of the main and larger minority religions, their beliefs and hierarchies. He expresses concern about the BBC's ability to have an overview of coverage of religion and ethics given the diffuse editorial and commissioning structure for religion and suggests the BBC may want to consider how to address this.

Stuart Prebble notes that critics suggest that the BBC is largely run by people of a similar political, educational and social background, who might, perhaps, be loosely defined as belonging to a "liberal consensus". BBC journalists, he notes, are, like everyone, fallible, and their critics are bound to wonder whether it is possible for private opinions to remain irrelevant to professional judgements. He says the most important thing to note is the conviction shared by almost everyone he spoke to in the BBC that the private leanings of staff do not impact upon their journalism.

The recommendations in Stuart Prebble's report include finding a more systematic way of reviewing coverage of big stories and of questioning assumptions about the prevailing consensus. Stuart Prebble suggests the BBC finds ways of monitoring currents of opinion in the wider community and of ensuring the views expressed in phone-in programmes or online are fed back into editorial thinking. Stuart Prebble hopes that the BBC's move of many programmes to Salford may improve breadth of opinion and suggests programmes like Question Time might do more to reach potential audience members who are not already BBC viewers or listeners.

In terms of how the BBC's provision of breadth of opinion has evolved since John Bridcut's report in 2007, Stuart Prebble concludes that the BBC reflected an impressive range of opinions before that date, and continues to do so. For most BBC journalists, he argues, the principles underpinning the Bridcut report were second nature anyway. Despite that, he believes that continuous vigilance is necessary to ensure views which some programme makers may find unpalatable are given an appropriate airing.

## Trust Conclusions

The BBC has a position of great trust in the eyes of licence fee payers. Its journalistic mission is to provide audiences with the accurate and impartial information they need to be able to form their own views on the issues that shape public policy and their own lives. The right to freedom of expression is not only about the right to express views. It is about the right to receive views. For the BBC that means not only giving the gist of the most significant views at the time a news story breaks but over time and across all its services providing licence fee payers with a wide range of opinion. Listening to other people's views and deciding what to accept, what to reject and what to actively challenge is fundamental to a healthy democratic society. The BBC's journalists and content producers play a vital role every day in bringing views we would not otherwise hear into our lives. The Trust wants those who work for the BBC to feel that they can and must aspire to search out those whose opinions may impact upon society, even those which are unpalatable, and bring them to licence fee payers. Hand in hand with that goes the duty to set opinions in sufficient context and give them due weight.

The Trust is grateful to Stuart Prebble, to Cardiff University and Oxygen Brand Consulting and to those who made submissions to the review for their considerable work. The Trust also appreciates the efforts of the BBC Executive, in providing significant amounts of information for the research team and for the thoughtfulness expressed in the staff interviews with the author.

Stuart Prebble's report provides an engaging and thought-provoking overview of how the BBC delivers breadth of opinion across its output. The Trust welcomes his description of the centrality of breadth of opinion to the BBC's mission.

The review presented some challenges compared with its predecessors. Breadth of opinion cannot easily be measured in absolute terms – for example, what would constitute "sufficient" breadth of opinion? Previous Trust impartiality reviews have focused on whether the BBC was providing impartial content in particular subject areas such as science, business or coverage of the UK nations. Breadth of opinion is a broader subject and a less straightforward one to assess empirically. The content analysis associated with the review had to do some innovative work on capturing the "wagon wheels" of opinion included in content, whilst the audience research had to provide more context and explanation than is often the case as breadth of opinion is not a concept which audiences usually consider.

### **Overall Breadth of Opinion**

The Trust welcomes the clear finding in the report that the BBC provides an impressive range of opinion. The Trust notes this was supported by the audience research which suggested that those who participated felt the BBC does a "good job" in providing breadth of opinion over time and across output, and that it is impartial. But the audience do not simply want opinion; they want the opinions that matter to them and that will most help them form a view. As the audience research noted, the audience "want more than just uninformed or emotional 'opinions' on the BBC, but opinions that are both informing and representative of the major strands of thought on any given issue". The BBC needs to exercise constant vigilance in maintaining both intelligent and accessible breadth of opinion and this review is only one tool to ensure this is kept front of mind.

The Trust is aware that the unusual nature of this review is such that it is not possible to deliver a definitive assessment of the precise changes in breadth of opinion covered by BBC content over five years. This is because the different stories were being analysed within a different set of news judgements. Even so the Trust notes that between 2007 and 2012 the review's content analysis identified a slight increase in the breadth of opinion provided in the three subject areas. The Trust is pleased to note that the majority of those in the audience research felt that they heard their own views on BBC output, thought the BBC delivered a good range of opinion and that it was impartial. The Trust notes that this view within the focus groups is supported by recent quantitative polling by Ipsos MORI for the BBC, which found that, when asked which ONE source of news people would turn to for impartial coverage, 49% named BBC news, compared with 14% for ITV

and 3% for Channel 4 News.<sup>1</sup>

On the three specific topics of religion and belief, immigration and the UK's relationship to the EU, the Trust welcomes Stuart Prebble's conclusion that:

- today's BBC gives due weight to all significant strands of opinion on the subject of immigration
- there is a wide and comprehensive range of information and viewpoints on the EU in various BBC on-air and online services
- the BBC's services of worship, news and analysis produced by its Religion and Ethics team is comprehensive and impressive.

The Trust notes Stuart Prebble's description of a slowness in the past in accommodating opinion on immigration and the EU which politicians were uncomfortable in voicing. John Bridcut's report also stated the BBC had come late to those stories.

## Europe

On Europe, the Trust notes that, in the snapshot of programmes it examined, the content analysis indicated the EU was more often treated as a problem in BBC content than otherwise and that this applied both to 2007 and to 2012. In both years much of the coverage could be characterised as relatively narrow and procedural and there was little substantive information about what the EU actually does and how much it actually costs. Interesting and informing the public on the UK and the European Union is a continuing challenge for the BBC. The Trust draws the Executive's attention to the audience research which suggested that audiences are aware they may have a referendum on the EU and expressed an interest in reliable economic views, and to the European Commission's submission to this review, which said the issue it thought needed to be addressed most vigorously was ensuring journalists had the requisite knowledge and information. The Trust considers the EU is an area where it may be particularly valuable for the BBC Executive to consider Stuart Prebble's recommendation that finding new voices become a routine part of the job in relevant roles within the BBC, with annual performance reviews used to assess and recognise individuals for improving breadth of opinion in this way. The

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[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/bbc\\_report\\_trust\\_and\\_impartiality\\_report\\_may\\_2013.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/bbc_report_trust_and_impartiality_report_may_2013.pdf)

Trust is aware that performance reviews are already used in this way and considers BBC management should feel encouraged in its efforts to develop a range of new voices and opinions.

The Trust notes that a focus on the political agenda forms a crucial backdrop to much of what Stuart Prebble found on the subjects of immigration and Europe and this aspect of his report is dealt with separately below.

### **Immigration**

The Trust is pleased to note that the Cardiff University report found the varied views on immigration broadly representative of views in England, Scotland and Wales, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey. Whilst the choice of stories can never be expected to be chosen in proportion to public interest the Trust was interested to note that Cardiff University's research suggested that the number of stories on immigration did not appear to reflect the level of public concern on the issue, which has consistently appeared in the top five when people are asked by Ipsos MORI to name the most important issue facing the country. The BBC Executive will wish to reflect on the nature and amount of its coverage on this subject. The audience research shows that participants are keen to push aside the propaganda and uncover more facts to come to a personal view.

### **Religion and Ethics**

The Trust notes the audience research finding that in the UK today a large number of non-believers know little about religion, are almost entirely indifferent to it and find it extremely difficult to understand the "world view" of the believer. That poses particular challenges for the BBC, and the Executive is asked to take this into account so that the BBC pitches its content with this possible lack of knowledge in mind, providing context or sometimes explaining the basics of religious positions. This should also assist the very religious who feel that the BBC's approach is secular because they do not hear their own view explained. The Trust also notes anecdotal evidence, collected by Stuart Prebble from representatives of all religions but particularly from the Church of England, of a disappointingly low level of basic knowledge about their faiths among journalists who contact them from the BBC. The Trust agrees with Stuart Prebble that generalist journalists employed by the BBC should be expected to have a basic knowledge of the main and larger minority religions, their beliefs and hierarchies. The Trust asks the Executive to encourage journalists to use the BBC College of Journalism facilities on religion and welcomes the BBC's plans to establish a pan-BBC forum on religion and ethics to encourage collaboration and the sharing of information in this area.

It is interesting that the audience research found both those from a Muslim background and those of other faiths felt that they wanted a more rounded portrayal of Muslims. The BBC has provided thoughtful and compelling output on Islam but portrayal goes wider than that and this is a finding commissioners, editors and content producers will want to bear in mind. The audience research points to a more profound issue which is also alluded to in the content analysis. That analysis, which the Trust acknowledges provides only a snapshot due to the very different nature of the stories sampled, found that coverage of Islam was often framed by negative debate because of the stories on the news agenda. The circumstances surrounding recent events at Woolwich put this into sharp focus.

It is inevitable that in covering the effects of radical Islamism all media outlets will report on extreme views about Islam. These views lie behind a number of terrorist attacks around the world and they are, and should be, fully reported. But there is an onus on all media, particularly the BBC, to ensure that such coverage separates out the beliefs and acts of radicalised religious groups from others. The higher the sensitivity the more the BBC has a duty to explore these issues and ensure audiences are informed, however unpalatable the views involved.

### **The Political Agenda**

Stuart Prebble has argued that the relative dominance of Westminster and national politicians as a driver for the BBC's daily news agenda (on these issues at least) can have a tendency to distract editorial attention from what may be the concerns of the wider community. The content analysis found a striking dominance of political voices in both of the years analysed (2007 and 2012), a dominance which had increased in coverage of stories about the UK's relationship with the EU. Immigration stories too were often framed by politicians, though the number of politicians used in stories about religion and belief had seen a sizeable drop in the period studied. The Trust notes that the BBC has a duty, as one of its public purposes set out in the Agreement, to promote understanding of the UK political system. Reporting on the UK's Parliaments and views of its elected representatives is an important part of that purpose. Immigration and the UK's relationship with the EU are both subjects where political developments have a major impact and the Trust understands that much of the reporting of the stories will always be led by political developments across the UK.

Nonetheless, the Trust notes that a preoccupation with Westminster and its concerns was one of the findings of the report for the Trust by Professor Anthony King in 2008. Professor King was reviewing post-devolution coverage of the four UK nations but there is relevance in his noting of a certain symbiosis between BBC journalists and Westminster politicians and in his suggestion that a priority for the BBC should be approaching coverage of the UK in a less Westminster-centred way. The Trust has previously acknowledged that the BBC has made significant efforts since the King report to address what in some circumstances can seem to be a disproportionate focus on Westminster politics. Similarly, following the Wilson report in 2005 on Coverage of the EU, the BBC recognised the need to move coverage beyond the "Westminster prism" and find ways of addressing opinion that has not emerged through Parliament or other formal institutions. The content analysis for this review found that the EU debate was dominated by British mainstream political positions. The low coverage given to UKIP on the sample of programmes that were the subject of the content analysis looks at odds with the levels of support the party was receiving in public opinion polls at this period, though the sample period was shortly before the 2013 local elections and the rise in UKIP coverage associated with those elections.

The Trust believes that deciding how much space to afford Westminster politicians is a particular challenge for BBC News and it invites the Director of News to consider how BBC journalists can broaden both the range of people who comment on stories and the range of stories itself, to ensure the BBC is gathering its opinions – and its stories – from as wide a range of sources as is necessary. Stuart Prebble refers in his report to the use of the appraisal system to encourage take-up of new voices by programme makers. The

Trust is aware that the system is already used in this way and considers BBC management should feel encouraged in its efforts to develop a range of new voices and opinions.

### **Breadth on Bulletins**

The Trust is heartened by the finding in the review's audience research that the audience was looking to news and current affairs to increase its own understanding and to help it form a view. The audience wanted informed and informing views representative of major strands of thought. However, the Trust notes that another finding in the audience research was that the audience's perceptions of breadth of opinion derived mainly from the major news bulletins like the BBC News at Six and BBC News at Ten. They did not *as a matter of routine* notice and appreciate other broadcast content that, when shown to them by the moderators, they had felt was excellent at delivering breadth.

The Trust understands that delivery of breadth of opinion in a bulletin poses different challenges to delivery in a current affairs programme or factual programme. The BBC's commitment to breadth of opinion is across the whole of the BBC's output rather than individual programmes or series but the Trust suggests the BBC may want to consider ways of ensuring the bulletins benefit from any broadening of voices and opinions on other parts of the output so that new contributors are accessible for programmes with tight time constraints.

### **The Audience's Voice**

The audience research identified a need for more linkage between output strands, to help audiences appreciate the breadth and depth of the BBC's content and to help provide improved context for stories. The audience also expected their own view to be invited and fed back into the news stream. The Trust welcomes the content analysis finding that radio and online used and encouraged audience comment on immigration and religion. However, the content analysis saw little evidence of UGC and social media comment on the BBC programmes it studied whilst audience research suggested this was precisely what audiences thought should be used to get input from affected or experienced individuals and answer the audience's developing questions and so provide more fresh and relevant content. The Trust recognises that there are real editorial challenges in ensuring use of UGC and social media are appropriate but with both strands of research identifying a similar issue, it suggests this is something the BBC is missing out on.

The Trust welcomes the Executive's plans to expand its use of cross-trailing between programmes and online and to examine ways of incorporating audience views to a greater degree. On live audience programmes such as Question Time, the Trust considers that such programmes need, by their nature, to attract an interested and engaged audience and that the BBC goes to appreciable lengths to achieve as broad and balanced a range of those attending as it can.

### **Conclusion**

The Trust notes that the report states that there remains the need, also identified by John Bridcut, to ensure programme makers look outside their own comfort zone and are stimulated to challenge their own assumptions. As Bridcut said "...there can never be too much fresh, lateral or distinctive thinking".

The Trust notes that since John Bridcut's report a major programme of cost-savings has been introduced across the BBC. Delivering Quality First is the BBC's plan for how it can best deliver the highest quality programmes and content to audiences until the end of the Charter in 2017 with reduced resources. The opening of Salford and New Broadcasting House have also occurred in the period since the Bridcut report, as have some other moves within BBC production. The Trust agrees with Stuart Prebble that the opening of Salford should provide opportunities to broaden the BBC's approach to stories and issues and that bringing together journalists in New Broadcasting House, London, should be beneficial. The Trust also, however, notes Stuart Prebble's warning that the BBC must be on its guard against homogeneity in thinking where staff are gathered on large sites. The BBC may wish to examine ways of expanding its current programme of invited speakers and finding a way of ensuring as many programme makers as possible are exposed to them in ways which can be incorporated into already full days.

Constant vigilance is essential and the Trust welcomes the BBC's plans to make increased efforts to monitor currents of opinion in the wider community. The Trust would welcome an update from the BBC's Editorial Director in summer 2014 on progress in the following areas:

- the use of "stand back" moments at News Group Board and of story champions on big stories
- the role of the multi-media editor or others in co-ordinating coverage
- dissemination of opinion gathered by the audience response team
- cross-promotion of BBC services
- the establishment of a pan-BBC forum on religion and ethics and analysis of the Executive's post-Census research in this area and how this might impact on monitoring opinion
- the use of training and the College of Journalism in raising the general level of knowledge about religion and ethics amongst programme makers
- and how the Executive is ensuring content producers are challenging their own assumptions on the shared consensus on any story.

# INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT FOR THE BBC TRUST BY STUART PREBBLE

## Introduction

In common with a great many men of my age and disposition, I am a serial insomniac. As such, I am a frequent sampler of a very wide range of stories from around the globe, courtesy of the BBC World Service. Some years ago, I remember my tortured small-hours imaginings being further persecuted by the long-running account of two tribes in Africa, whose enduring conflicts involved raids on neighbouring villages in which the young men of the village would be rounded up, and their hands would be chopped off with machetes. The world is unfortunately full of stories of violence and cruelty, but I remember reacting to this peculiar brutality with special horror. Take just a moment to consider what must be the reality of such an incident, inflicted on young men roused from their beds, held down, and mutilated in this way. How could any human being do such a thing to another human being? It seems almost impossible to conceive.

Then in the early hours of one particular morning, I heard a BBC correspondent telling the background story of how these two tribes had been at war for decades if not centuries. Year after year, the young men of one tribe would raid the villages of the other tribe and kill all the young men. The following year, or as soon as the opportunity presented itself, the children or other relatives of those recently murdered would stage a return attack, and would kill all the young men they could locate from their enemy. It was a cycle of tit-for-tat killings which had gone on since anyone could remember, and was set to go on way into the future.

Except that one day one of the tribes stopped long enough to ask if there was any way to break the cycle; was there any way to prevent their enemy tribe from staging raiding parties and killing their young men, short of killing the enemies' young men before they could do so? How could they take away the ability of the young men to commit murder, without murdering them?

Since the murders were carried out using a spear or a machete, the only indispensable capability was the use of the hands. If they stopped short of murder, and instead confined themselves to cutting off the hands of the boys in the neighbouring village, then their enemies would no longer be able to hold an instrument of murder, and therefore be unable to take part in a revenge attack. Appalling and abhorrent though it seems and undoubtedly is, amputating hands was the only thing they could think of to do, which stood any chance of de-escalating the otherwise endless cycle. It's an arresting thought.

When I heard that story I was reminded of the advice given to me as a young man by a wise counsellor – "never judge a person's behaviour without an intimate understanding of

their circumstances". It's a piece of advice which serves well on any and all occasions. In a world which can frequently seem full of inexplicable cruelties and aberrations, there are in fact very few people who are simply evil. Most, though not all, acts of what seem to be mindless violence or destruction have their own logic in the minds of the perpetrators. Only if you can truly put yourself in the place of the person carrying out what seems at first sight to be a totally senseless act, can you hope to understand what was going on in the mind of the perpetrator. The result may well be condemnation and rejection of the view expressed but it will at least be an informed rejection.

This story from Africa is an instance of an initial failure of empathy in a specific and perhaps rather remote circumstance, but that same failure can also be evident in areas of public policy closer to home. The example with which I have regularly irritated journalists and producers within the BBC during this review involves the issue of gun control in the United States. I believe that many people listening to or watching the BBC in recent months would infer from its coverage that the BBC is in favour of gun control in America. This does not mean that opponents of gun control are not given airtime on the BBC but that, when they are, it seems to me that they are likely to be challenged in a manner which is different from the way that proponents are treated. This happens, I suggest, because of what we could call "an assumed consensus" within which we make editorial judgements – as evidenced by the Today programme presenter who declared in an interview on 23 February that "the British people are bemused by the anti-gun control argument in the US". All our instincts tell us that having fewer guns in circulation must be a good thing, and so (to a greater or lesser extent) the BBC treats as eccentrics anyone who takes a different view.

But let us see if we can look at the situation in another way. Tens of millions of people in the United States oppose gun control, and they cannot all be crazy. Opponents of gun control are not people who are in favour of shooting children in schools with automatic rifles – they are people who are every bit as against it as are the rest of us – they simply have a different answer to the question of how to make such shootings less likely. They believe that if you introduce gun control into a nation where there are already tens of millions of legal and illegal guns in circulation, then the law-abiding citizens will give up their guns, and the criminals will keep theirs; not a situation guaranteed to make our children safer.

Seeing this argument from all sides involves the very simplest exercise in empathy. It goes without saying that if the US were starting from a position similar to the position in the UK, where relatively few guns are in circulation, then every effort should be made to restrict their further circulation. But that is not the situation in the US; that horse has bolted, and they are dealing with an entirely different position. If between us we are unable to stretch our powers of empathy even to the extent of imagining a different starting point, then what hope do we have of understanding and empathising with the views of people we disagree with from the Middle East or North Korea?

The imperative for us to get inside the minds of those with whom we may think we disagree has never been greater. We live in an ever more complex world, in which other peoples' problems may at one time have seemed far away, but are now metaphorically and physically on our doorsteps. While once it might have been possible to ignore the

position of peoples who speak different languages, worship other gods, and nurture grievances against us, this is no longer so. If we don't understand the difficulties caused by polluted water, or preventable diseases, or hunger, or the repression of minorities, then sooner or later they will be visiting us if they are not doing so already. However baseless any link being made, they may be arriving in person on our shores or flying airplanes into our landmarks. Sticking our fingers in our ears is unlikely to be the answer.

So if we accept the desirability of hearing the voices of those with a point of view we have not heard or do not share, how are we to do so? While the digital world has made it possible for many millions of flowers to bloom, it has also led to a cacophony of voices seeking our attention. In these circumstances, the market has done what markets will always do, which is to find ways to allow us to select. It has done so by providing pre-editing tools which enable us to filter out what we do not wish to see or hear. We can pre-set our EPGs so that we scan only our favourite channels. We can pre-set our online services, or our Twitter, to bring us news and information about the things we have already declared ourselves to be interested in, and to eliminate everything else. The serendipity of the linear broadcast channel where we had to get up out of our armchairs and turn a knob if we wanted to find something else, has long gone. We have the power to pre-edit views and opinions and information which we don't think we will be interested in, and in a world full of a blur of competing messages, many of us do just that. And so the digital world which is giving the means for everyone to have a voice, has also provided us with the cotton wool to stuff in our ears to prevent us from hearing them. What should have been an ever-broader digest of opinions and diversity, can so easily result in a narrowing of voices and consequent narrowing of minds.

If we agree that to seek out and listen to voices which say things we do not necessarily want to hear, or even that we find offensive, is a "social good", how is it to be achieved? To do so is not a simple task, nor is it inexpensive, and nor is it always pleasant. Our instincts are to recoil from views which fall outside of the range that we find palatable – or indeed to write them off as crazy once they go outside our definition of acceptability. So who will undertake this important task for us? Who will take on for us the responsibility of locating and obtaining an in-depth interview with the opponent of gun control, or the tribesman caught carrying out unthinkable acts of brutality against their life-long enemies?

This imperative – for all of us to begin to try to put ourselves in the situations and the minds of others around us – provides one of the fundamental justifications for all of us to pay our licence fee for our national public service broadcaster. It is not a "nice to have" or a woolly aspiration for the BBC; it is a fundamental. Its founding maxim – "Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation" is sometimes misquoted and abbreviated to "Nations Shall Speak Unto Nations", and though the former is better than the latter, either will do. But it is not enough for one side to speak, the other side has also to hear, and so for the BBC to fully acquit this lofty intention, it has not only to reflect the views of a wide range of people whose opinions might otherwise never be heard unless and until they made themselves impossible to ignore; it has also to present them in a way which will make the rest of us want to hear them. Not enough, therefore, simply to provide a platform for views we may not instantly like or indeed from which we may recoil, but it is also necessary to provide a context in which we will listen carefully to views we may find

hostile or even odious, even if it is only so that we understand the proposition or point of view to which we are saying "No".

Against that background, the aspect of the BBC's mission which is deliberately to seek out and reflect a wide range of views and voices on as wide as possible a range of subjects, is no mere luxury on top of all of the other obligations towards impartiality and accuracy. Indeed, range and diversity of the voices heard are inextricable aspects of impartiality and accuracy. How can we be impartial unless we know the range of views we are judging between? How can we be accurate unless we give all relevant aspects of the picture? In its submission to this review, the European Commission praised the quality of coverage and highlighted, "a Populus poll published in September 2012 in which 73% of respondents said they trusted the BBC to give accurate information. No national newspaper exceeded 50% and no tabloid 25%." But as the Commission went on to say, "This striking level of trust is a compliment to the BBC's output over many decades. But it also means it is incumbent on the BBC to maintain and further improve its levels of quality and impartiality."

So how do we discover true impartiality? Look it up in the dictionary, and impartiality at first seems like a simple enough idea. Definitions involve good things like objectivity, balance and justice, with which few would quarrel. Like so many aspects of our modern life, however, impartiality turns out on closer examination to be far more complex than at first appears. The word has been analysed and defined perhaps more than any other in the history of broadcasting, and learned articles and tomes have been written by some of the cleverest people to have worked in or around the media. Some of them have contributed to this report.

Professor of Television Journalism, Stewart Purvis, has a section on the history of the BBC's approach to impartiality in his forthcoming book, *When Reporters Cross the Line*. He describes the 1960s pamphlet, the in-house BBC Radio Newsroom Guide: "This never provided a clear definition of impartiality. Rather the reverse. The authors believed that broadcast journalism was about what you selected to transmit and that 'to couple the word selection with the word impartial would seem to be a paradox. Any selection must, of its nature, be to some degree partial'. But it did offer one helpful clarification to young journalists: 'Impartiality must not be confused with neutrality. We are not pallid neutrals in regard to matters which offend the national conscience. We are not neutral in regard to crime, and to the sins of cruelty and racial hatred'."

British broadcasters have been required by Parliament to apply impartiality to their news and coverage of controversial matters, but to avoid the pitfalls of strict neutrality Parliament has prefixed the word "impartiality" with the word "due". However, there is an argument which says that "due impartiality" instantly all but abandons the pure idea of objectivity, and calls for an informed but essentially subjective judgement of how much relative balance is due between different positions. Ofcom has a useful definition of these terms in its Code: "Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. 'Due' means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. So 'due impartiality' does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented. The approach to due impartiality may vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of programme and channel, the likely expectation of the audience as to content, and the

extent to which the content and approach is signalled to the audience. Context is important.”

It is not deemed appropriate, for example, to take a completely balanced and objective view between dictatorships and democracy, or between violence and non-violence, etc. However, there are in some cases legitimate arguments to be made in favour of both dictatorships and violence, and the weight to be given to such arguments is a matter of subjective judgement. So to posit the argument, if the dictator in question is “our” dictator, we may be more in favour of dictatorship than otherwise. If the violence is being perpetrated against a dictator who does not enjoy our support, we may be more in favour of it than when similar violence is directed against us.

It is at this point that the word “due” becomes operative, and what follows is that the demeanour and position taken by the person making the judgement becomes relevant, as does the context in time and place in which the judgement occurs. It is well understood that “one man’s freedom-fighter is another man’s terrorist” and equally that a terrorist today can be a statesman tomorrow – indeed, we see it and live with it in our everyday politics.

When the Adam Smith Institute’s Whig blogger heard about this review, he described the task as a difficult one: “To my mind, the whole impartiality debate is entirely misleading and that, of course, is the point. I would argue that it is impossible for news reporting to be impartial and it is impossible for any enquiry to assess impartiality. No amount of study or research could possibly discern the motivations and detect the subtle sins of commission and omission which such assessment would require. Moreover, such researchers would necessarily have their own bias. Rather more abstractly, it is impossible for any human being to be impartial in a field so complex, diverse and unfalsifiable as human social activity i.e. ‘the news’ – only an omniscient god could make such a claim of knowledge.”

Indeed, and to add a further level of complication, the question of what impartiality is “due” involves an assumption of a shared consensus between the broadcaster and the listener of what are the outside boundaries of acceptable points of view. Broadcasters include views in their output which may be extreme but which are deemed to be just about acceptable at one boundary, all the way through the gamut of opinion up to those which are extreme but acceptable at the opposite boundary. It may be acceptable to broadcast the point of view of a person who advocates revolution through peaceful change, but is it acceptable to broadcast the views of someone who advocates violent revolution? Is it more acceptable if the proposed violent revolution is against a regime which is led by a violent dictator? Similarly, is it acceptable to broadcast the views of a dictator who oppresses his people, but not one who uses chemical weapons to annihilate them? Broadcasters seek to reflect views along a continuum between extreme positions, but quite how extreme are the positions which broadcasters consider acceptable to broadcast and audiences to listen to involves this second layer of judgement.

Broadcasters in the UK have signed up to the principle of “due impartiality”, and as the national broadcaster, uniquely funded by the licence fee, the BBC has been charged with, and has willingly embraced, a particular responsibility in this regard. Few would argue against the idea that we are entitled to expect higher standards from the BBC than from

other media, and with very rare exceptions, we get them. It comes down in the end to a matter of trust: as the BBC's Chief Adviser, Politics, Ric Bailey, told us, "Due is a judgement and impartiality and trust are very closely linked. You are effectively saying you are trusting my judgement to get things right. All the evidence is that the audience does do that." They do, and the task they are entrusting to the BBC is equal to the trials of Sisyphus.

Between them, journalists within the BBC make quite literally thousands of editorial judgements each day, on radio, TV and online, and each individual one of them is potentially subject to examination, analysis, and even highly public scrutiny and criticism. No matter how many of them they get right, there is always another one to make, and a single poor decision is likely to be judged as though the previous good decisions had not taken place. If and when they get it wrong, there are few places to hide. The demeanour and position of the BBC, expressed through the people within it who make these subjective judgements, is a legitimate subject for scrutiny, by or on behalf of the people providing the substantial privileges it enjoys.

Hence the vigilance of the BBC's regulator, the BBC Trust, in seeking not only constantly to monitor standards of impartiality, but also to refine and make more sophisticated our understanding of the term in the modern world.

It was for this reason that in 2005, the BBC commissioned an independent TV producer, John Bridcut, to write a report which would review the current state of understanding of impartiality and the BBC's special responsibilities in this regard. John's report ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/editorial\\_standards/impartiality/safeguarding\\_impartiality.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/safeguarding_impartiality.html)) is a comprehensive and in some ways remarkable piece of work, in which the author exhaustively describes the important concepts and processes behind the implementation of impartiality within the BBC. The report is required reading for anyone seeking to take this subject seriously, and since I could not improve on it, I do not intend to repeat much of his excellent exposition. The relevant point here is that, in compiling his report, John carried out an impressive journalistic exercise of his own, taking note of what was already the developing thinking about the increasing complexity of achieving due impartiality in an ever busier and more technically sophisticated world.

Whereas impartiality might at one time have been seen relatively simplistically as a balance between opposing views – employer and trade unionist, believer and atheist, left and right – life seemed to be becoming more interesting. More and better informed people had more opinions, or a wider range of views; or if they did not, the advent of social media and consequent higher visibility and greater volume of the noise they produced, made it appear to be so. More and more varied and nuanced points of view suggested that what had been the "seesaw" of binary debate of the past was becoming more of a "wagon wheel", in which the spokes of opposing arguments were more multifarious.

One suspects that having alighted on the beguiling title "From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel" for his report, John Bridcut may later have had cause for second thoughts, as the metaphor became more and more clunky. The spokes of the wagon wheel were not placed at regular intervals, it turned out, and nor were they necessarily of the same length. The axle was not necessarily placed in the centre and the wheel was not always a

circle. Altogether a ride on this wagon must be a bumpy adventure, and so it has proved. The Head of News for 5 Live described part of the problem: "The challenge was how do you grapple with an audience that is increasingly disparate, as post war consensus breaks down?"

However, we got the general idea, and John Bridcut's report made twelve neat points, none of which were difficult to agree with. They included a restatement that impartiality is at the heart of the relationship of trust which the BBC has with its audience; that impartiality can be compromised as much by what is left out as by what is included; that the requirements of impartiality apply equally across all genres and platforms, etc. The Report was accepted and adopted wholeheartedly by the BBC Trust and Executive. At its heart was a recognition that in the more sophisticated society in which we now live, there is a broad range of voices and opinions which have a legitimacy and entitlement to be heard, and that it was part of the BBC's job going forward to attempt better to reflect them.

John Bridcut's report: "From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel" was published in 2007 and became a part of the fabric of BBC journalism; the necessity to reflect an appropriate breadth of opinion became part of the responsibilities of the job. So when, five years on, the BBC Trust felt that the subject of impartiality merited a further general review, it was decided to take the report as the starting point, and to examine whether and to what extent its objectives had been realised. In order to avoid the danger of the work being too general or abstract, the topics of the UK's relationship with the EU, immigration and religion were chosen as particular prisms through which to review progress.

It was decided that this review should have three elements. These would be:

- 1) Content analysis seeking to compare impartiality and the range of voices heard on the BBC in 2007 with similar coverage in 2012. This would obviously be a difficult exercise – not least because no two stories five years apart were likely to be of exactly the scale in importance and duration, and even if they were, the background and news landscape against which they took place could not be identical. However, it did seem possible to use this method to gain some pointers to general trends and themes, and so it has proven.
- 2) An extensive qualitative audience research study, designed to gather opinions about the BBC's approach to, and coverage of, religion. This was thought to be important in order to ascertain the views of people from a range of backgrounds and beliefs – as well as those who said they had no religious beliefs, and whether they felt that their own points of view and opinions had been over- or under-represented in BBC coverage.
- 3) An independent author would be invited to write a paper, taking into account the results of items 1 and 2 above, as well as the views of those among the BBC's friends and critics who wished to express them, and the views and experiences of a range of editorial figures within the BBC itself.

I was asked to undertake this last task in October 2012, and though it is a subject in which I have had an interest and association for forty years, I agreed to do so only after some hesitation. Firstly because the charge which is most frequently made about

impartiality within the BBC is based on the notion that it is largely run by a group with similar backgrounds and attitudes, loosely describable as "liberal progressives" – and of course, I am one. I point this out quickly only because I know that others will. However, in common with the overwhelming number of journalists within the BBC and other regulated broadcasters in the UK, I leave my personal politics at home when I go to work as a producer and broadcaster, and have taken this position when approaching this report.

My other reservation was that this review would by definition involve engaging with individuals and groups who felt that their voices had not sufficiently been heard on the BBC airwaves. Instead of making their concerns known to the BBC, however, they would be making them known to me, and any finding of this report which fell short of a whole-hearted endorsement of their concerns is bound to invite dissatisfaction. In the event I have found myself to be a conduit for a wider range of grievances than fall reasonably within this remit, and have taken them into account as best as I am able.

That said, however, this is an appropriate point to express sincere thanks to the many people from outside of the BBC – admirers, critics, and combinations of both, who willingly gave considerable time and thought towards informing my deliberations. There have been many and I have been grateful in all cases for a series of fascinating discussions, and in some cases for follow-up papers or individual written submissions. Thanks also are due to the many people from the BBC who did much to assist me. It would not be appropriate to let this thought pass without acknowledging that my enquiry largely coincided with what was probably the most troubled and traumatic period in the history of BBC journalism. BBC journalists have been called to account for the decisions they made, and the tiny minutiae of the processes involved in making them, in a way I have never witnessed in four decades in broadcasting. I do not underestimate the forbearance which they have had to exercise in also coping with the demands and requirements of this report, and I express my empathy and respect.

However, if there is to be any point in spending six months seeking out and speaking to scores of people on this important subject, watching and listening to scores of TV and radio programmes and reading countless web articles with this in mind, then it must be to produce a report which not only says something worth saying about the state of due impartiality and "the wagon wheel" in the BBC, but also goes beyond that and provides some stimulus for a discussion about the next stage of thinking. At risk of torturing the metaphor well past a place where mercy and good judgement would intervene, we might be talking about something – "beyond the wagon wheel".

This report has therefore been divided into two sections. In the first we say what we can in direct answer to the question of whether the BBC has been delivering, and is delivering, a suitable breadth of opinion on the subjects of immigration, the EU and religion and belief. In the second we seek to open a discussion, within the BBC and perhaps more widely, about whether the benefits of plurality brought to us by the digital age have been accompanied by sufficient maturing to allow us to hear a wider range of opinions than we have been willing to countenance hitherto, without the clamour of popular protest drowning out the opportunity to listen and learn.

My final preface before we get on with the main point of the exercise is to acknowledge and thank the team at the BBC Trust; Fran O'Brien for guidance and wisdom, Helen Nice for good advice and hard work, and Victoria Wakely for all of the above, but in particular for her hard work in arranging, assisting in, and recording our many interviews, and also for her tact in steering me away from more preposterous lines of thinking. If any credit is due for the methodical nature of the report, it falls to her; any opprobrium arising from the wisdom or judgements of its content falls rightly upon me.

## John Bridcut's report and its reception

When John Bridcut's report was published in June 2007 it represented a welcome crystallisation of a debate which was already under way within the editorial management of the BBC. It was, then as now, a time of rapid change in broadcasting, not least in the ever-hastening advance of unregulated digital channels and the fast-increasing proliferation of voices available to be heard via social media. Where once there were lengthy and learned debates about whether the media economy could sustain a second TV channel funded from advertising without damaging the quality of existing broadcasters, today we are fully and irreversibly in the age of convergence with not tens, hundreds or thousands, but millions of voices available to us at the touch of a button or the tweak of a mouse. Our audience research shows this has only increased – viewers have tablets on their laps when watching news, first exposure to breaking news can be via a tablet or a smart phone – the internet is perceived to convey both fact and breadth of opinion particularly well and news is now accessed faster than ever. From the blizzard of sometimes breathless discussion and debate about what all this means for public service broadcasters, John Bridcut managed skilfully to distil the developing thinking into digestible and cogent elements, and to produce a document which could form the basis of some practical measures.

The principles outlined in the report were approved by the BBC Trust, and the Executive's operation in implementing its findings were textbook. Merely a month after its publication, in July 2007, the Director, Editorial Policy began a series of at least 13 presentations to gatherings of teams of journalists throughout TV, radio and online, on the networks and in the BBC nations and regions. Managers attending those meetings were urged to "trickle down" the discussion to others unable to attend. A number of senior managers who gave interviews for this follow-up review remember attending these briefings, and all demonstrated a good recall of Bridcut's principles. Those who did not, or who for some reason had not been available to attend one of the meetings, had read the report subsequently and found it to describe what they felt they did routinely in the course of their daily journalism.

Further meetings and seminars were customised to suit the needs of some specialised audiences, and in particular the codified Bridcut principles have been incorporated into the frequent and oft-repeated briefings by the Chief Adviser, Politics, to teams of journalists approaching the onset of local, national and European elections.

In describing this process, however, it should not be inferred that the report was "a bolt from the blue" for most senior journalists within the BBC. It has already been stated that

Bridcut picked up, and imposed some very-welcome structure on, a wave of thinking which was already going on. For a great many journalists, the principles underpinning the report were in effect second nature anyway. They may not have referred to what they did by instinct as "breadth of view", and if they named it at all, they would have called it "telling all sides of the story". Right at the start of this review, I spoke to the then Deputy Director of News, Stephen Mitchell. He admitted, "With our resources we ought to be far more ambitious. We don't want Today to capture just the main strands of argument. The BBC should be capturing the strands of an argument earlier than everyone else."

For some, it was part of what made them come into journalism in the first place. Helen Boaden, Director, Radio and former BBC Director of News told us that seeking a range of opinions irrespective of her own view was part of her DNA as a journalist. She told us that "(a senior colleague) says that we came into journalism to tell people what to think. I did not. I came into journalism to find things out". The then Editor of BBC News at Six and BBC News at Ten, James Stephenson, told us, "The essence of impartiality is that you step aside from your own views and recognise baggage you might carry. I do genuinely think that happens." Presenter of Radio 4's The Media Show, Steve Hewlett, put it another way: "You only know what due impartiality means when you have done the journalism. That applies as much to reflecting opinions fully as it does to facts and stories."

The audience research carried out for this review endorses what these BBC journalists saw as their role. It suggests that the audience approaches controversial news topics hoping to gain a full understanding of them in order to be better able to form a personal view. Not all respondents necessarily had a fixed opinion in advance; to come to a full understanding they feel they needed to hear the full range of relevant views, not just an echo of their own, "(you need) all the views, to form your view". They also wished to be given adequate context.

The BBC journalists' "bible" is, of course, the BBC Editorial Guidelines, and work began on the latest revision in early 2009. Bridcut's recommendations were kept in mind in the course of updating the language highlighting the importance of breadth of opinion: the relevant section is worth quoting in full.

4.4.1: Across our output as a whole, we must be inclusive, reflecting a breadth and diversity of opinion. We must be fair and open-minded when examining the evidence and weighing material facts. We must give due weight to the many and diverse areas of an argument.

Breadth and diversity of opinion may require not just a political and cultural range, but, on occasions, reflection of the variations between urban and rural, older and younger, poorer and wealthier, the innovative and the status quo, etc. It may involve exploration of perspectives in different communities, interest groups and geographic areas.

The Editorial Guidelines are, of course, available to all BBC journalists at all times, and Bridcut further emphasised the importance of instilling these values at the training stage of the journalists' career, and of constantly reinforcing them through updating and re-training. These objectives have been taken on board through the BBC College of Journalism, which provides a range of in-person courses and online modules, designed to

reinforce the importance of impartiality in general, and breadth of voice in particular. I will look a little closer at some of this content later in our report.

Dissemination of the Bridcut principles was, as can be seen, as thorough as could reasonably be expected – but the first blast of enthusiasm was a long time ago, and with so many other priorities and preoccupations, it is not easy to maintain momentum behind a message. As the writer and former BBC reporter Dennis Sewell explained to us, “The fishing out of the Bridcut principles – making a deliberate attempt to question your own assumptions as a programme maker and examine institutional values and effect on audiences – these are things that can’t be done by senior management, they have to be done on the front line. Even after 2007 there was not much evidence of that going on.”

In addition, the BBC is a big and many-tentacled beast, and the distance between the brain and the business-end can in some cases be long. It may be all very well for very clever thinkers with little to do but to brainstorm the finer points of journalism policy, but when you have two hours to cast five people for a live debate on a local TV station and six other items to balance elsewhere in the show, the reality can seem a long way from the theory. Deadlines have always been tight and, with the ever-increasing demands of multiple outlets and 24 hour news, they are getting tighter. The audience told us in the research that, in an on-demand era, they experience news as almost instant, and therefore require that the main points of view on an issue should be present in coverage from the first moment of news coverage: whether in flagship bulletins or online. The sheer exigencies of getting on air remain a challenge in many circumstances, and the demands of Delivering Quality First, the BBC’s strategy for meeting a savings target of 20% by 2016/2017, while providing routes to greater efficiency, have in many cases reduced resources at the sharp end. Head of Programmes, BBC News, (and former Editor of Today) Ceri Thomas reminded us that “It is about capacity, though, as well as culture. If you slim down a news team, it has an impact. It becomes harder to go beyond the contacts book.” The challenge for BBC journalists is how – amidst the daily, hourly, minute-by-minute demands of news – to resist the temptation to reach for the contacts book which is packed with official spokespeople – readily available, proven deliverers. Regular Thought for the Day contributor, Professor Mona Siddiqui was not totally confident of the answer to that question: “I don’t know whether the producers are pushing themselves as hard as they can, just playing safe with the contacts they already have.”

The audience research provides some helpful reminders to journalists who do find the time and inclination to explore outside of “the usual suspects” about the directions in which they might look. Audiences seem increasingly conscious of, and resistant to, official spokespeople who may appear to trot out a pre-determined line; preferring to hear from “ordinary people” who may be directly affected by the issues under discussion. One viewer from Northern Ireland reported that “I have seen these people from the DUP and Sinn Fein talking every day for the last 25 years. I know what they say before they open their mouths.”

This thorny question of how to maintain a determination in the pursuit of a wider range of voices was posed to each one of the members of the senior BBC editorial staff who talked to us as part of this enquiry. Time and again, when asked how it is possible constantly to remind journalists involved in instant-news and fast turn-around bulletins, of the

requirement to stand back from stories and ask which voices and points of view have not been heard, the answer was a variation of "we have to be constantly vigilant".

In comparable circumstances, one answer might be to introduce a system of monitoring to ensure that new voices are heard and that we are not constantly reverting to "the usual suspects" when casting interviews. Measures such as making the discovery of new interviewees a part of an individual journalist's annual performance review can be helpful, and I have been told that this takes place. However, it is not immediately clear quite how such monitoring could be carried out systematically and effectively across a range of output. I will have some other recommendations later in this report.

## The five year follow-up report

The difficulty of monitoring delivery of breadth of voice by arithmetical or objective standards has been referred to already, and it has proven to be a tricky challenge to make reliable comparisons between the BBC's performance at the time of Bridcut and today. Aside from anything else, some of this thinking was already under way when the Bridcut report was published, and so there was no "start" moment and no "finish". I will return later to the findings of the content analysis and audience research.

Meanwhile, the method I chose to provide substance for this authored section of the report was to identify a range of people and organisations operating within the subject areas which provide our focus – the EU, immigration, and religion and belief; people with a point of view who might not feel that their own or similar voices had been sufficiently represented on the airwaves. I would contact as wide a range of opinions as I reasonably could, and invite them to tell us whether they felt their views were represented appropriately, or under-represented, on the BBC. Then I would do what I could to investigate individual concerns. In many cases these exchanges involved meetings, some conversations were conducted by telephone, and in other cases I invited written submissions. There were several combinations of conversations with follow-up papers. Without exception, the meetings and discussions were constructive, interesting and wide-ranging – but with rather few of the points raised being directly related to the question of breadth of view. However, a range of helpful, if tangential, points arose, and where possible these are taken into account in the relevant sections of this report.

The difficulty in obtaining objective statistical data has meant that we are more reliant than otherwise we might be on the evidence of witnesses who have directly relevant experience or are otherwise close to the situation. Ours is not, of course, a judicial enquiry, but the observations of informed witnesses are every bit as helpful and thought-provoking as evidence for this exercise as they might be in a court or tribunal. Hence, I contacted a number of prominent members of the media whose experience of the BBC, as interviewers, interviewees, critics or observers gives them authority to comment. Again, this led to a series of absolutely fascinating discussions, not all of which were directly relevant to this enquiry, but which provided valuable and fresh perspectives in a number of areas. I also approached a number of key figures from the BBC's editorial team, inviting them to speak to us about their understanding of breadth of view and how they implemented it. In addition to describing policy and practices, several felt able to express

observations and opinions based on their direct experience working "at the coalface". I have taken this as evidence which is, once again, every bit as significant as that derived from content analysis and audience surveys. In the event, the list of those interviewed is but a fraction of those within the BBC with legitimate roles and points of view on these subjects. There may be some who will feel they are conspicuous by their absence, but to whom I did not get due to limits of time and availability. If anyone feels slighted, I of course apologise.

Finally, my own knowledge of the BBC and many of the people in it spans four decades, from my appointment as a lowly BBC Graduate Trainee, through twenty-five years observing closely as a competitor, and for the last twelve years as an independent producer.

## **Section one: Immigration, the European Union, religion & belief**

Impartiality Reviews commissioned by the BBC Trust have in recent years included reports on the coverage by the BBC of Science, written by Professor Steve Jones from University College London, and a review of BBC coverage of the Arab Spring, conducted by former Senior Vice President of the Salzburg Global Seminar, Edward Mortimer. In both cases the authors were selected for their extensive background knowledge of the subjects, putting them in an excellent position to compare what they knew had taken place "in the real world" against what the BBC had reported.

A review of the delivery of Breadth of Opinion is self-evidently a more abstract subject, and so it was decided to choose three topics which were substantial in themselves and which provide the opportunity to identify wide ranges of views relating to each of them, which might arguably merit some attention and airtime on the BBC. The subjects of immigration, Europe and religion were selected.

It is immediately obvious that each of these three already huge subjects is further divisible into different aspects which might expect to be dealt with in different ways at different times by the BBC. To take only religion as an example, the subject instantly divides into programmes involving worship, as opposed to coverage of the workings and business of the main religions, and that's before we get to news coverage of controversies such as women bishops, gay marriage, and several recent scandals. Add to "Religion" the suffix "and Ethics" as we are reminded to do by the Humanists and Secularists, and even this aspect of the remit widens exponentially.

This is perhaps a long way of saying that reviewing the BBC's delivery of "breadth of view" across the subjects of immigration, Europe and religion cannot be achieved by comparing what we know has taken place with the way it has been covered by the BBC, as with Science or the Arab Spring; but we have to start somewhere.

### **Immigration**

Few subjects arouse as much emotion and anxiety as that of immigration. Perhaps because it involves the relationships between majorities and minorities in societies, which

have so often throughout history been the cause of trouble, the topic has always been a sensitive one. However, the landmark which is etched in the mind of everyone who has studied the subject in the UK is, of course, the so-called "rivers of blood" speech made in April 1968 by the then Conservative Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South-West, Enoch Powell. The speech provoked instant outflows of emotion on all sides, for and against, as Powell seemed to be drawing attention to a subject which so many ordinary people were concerned about, but which few politicians had been willing to talk about. Yet the words he used to express himself appeared designed to ignite rather than subdue the emotions which accompany the debate.

Powell was sacked from Edward Heath's shadow cabinet and later he joined the Ulster Unionists and became MP for South Down. Though he never apologised or seemed to regret his speech, these events did in effect confine him forever thereafter to the fringes of mainstream politics in the UK.

What happened to Powell may have been an object lesson for generations of aspiring politicians of all persuasions. Many have felt that the topic of immigration involves important issues which politicians have a duty to raise, but the few who attempted to do so were frequently drowned out by accusations of "playing the race card". Media coverage would rarely miss an opportunity to remind the audience of the social and political consequences of the "rivers of blood" speech. Students of the subject will be able to find many examples of politicians attempting to raise what might be a genuine social concern – to do with jobs, housing, pressure on schools – only to be accused, overtly or implicitly, of racism. Little wonder that so many gave up.

Despite the reluctance of mainstream politicians to raise the topic of immigration, it has remained a subject of widespread concern within the community. Ipsos MORI's "most important issues" index convincingly shows the rise of the race/immigration category from a marginal concern of a small minority to one of the few most-frequently named issues. Similar patterns emerge in polling over shorter time spans by other polling firms, including Gallup and YouGov. The issue is now on a par with unemployment, and today only the economy is seen by the public to be a more significant issue. At its peak in December 2007, 46% of respondents named race relations or immigration among the most important issues.

While it is probably unavoidable that large parts of the daily news agenda are driven by the priorities of mainstream politicians, on occasions when they fail to reflect the public mood, for whatever reason, it must fall to the BBC first of all to be aware of the situation and then to find ways to reflect what is happening in the wider community. Despite the demonstrably high levels of popular concern, advocates of the need for a public debate on the subject have felt that the BBC has been hesitant in the past in raising it. Ceri Thomas, until very recently Editor of Today, was very honest, "Any culture can be at risk of excluding what it thinks is wrong, possibly marginalising significant chunks of public opinion. We need to push against this consensus every day".

I talked to Sir Andrew Green and Alp Mehmet whose organisation Migration Watch is a lobbying group which, since 2001 has aimed to stimulate what they would regard as a proper debate on the subject of immigration. Green insists that, irrespective of the campaigning nature of Migration Watch, the statistics they produce have never successfully been contradicted. He points out, in particular, that their prediction in 2002

that there would be net immigration of two million in the following decade has proved to be correct. It was, he says, ignored by the BBC at the time. He has struggled over many years, he says, to get an appropriate hearing on the BBC.

Andrew Green claims that his organisation reflects the views of the 75% of people in Britain who respond to surveys indicating that they want to see immigration reduced, and the 51% who want to see it reduced a lot. In his view, such numbers clearly indicate a level of concern which justifies a "wagon wheel" debate in which both sides are given proportionate opportunities to be heard.

Helen Boaden, Director, Radio and until recently Director, BBC News, accepts that when she came into her role in September 2004 there had been a problem in the BBC's coverage of immigration. She was aware, she told us, of a "deep liberal bias" in the way that the BBC approached the topic, and specifically that press releases coming from Migration Watch were not always taken as seriously as they might have been.

Former Today programme reporter, Robin Aitken who, after he left, wrote a book about what he perceived as left-wing bias at the BBC [*Can We Trust the BBC?*, published in the same year as Bridcut's report] told us, "What damages the BBC on a subject like immigration is fundamental niceness and being loath to give offence to any part of the community. It is a self-censoring idea: 'Let's not encourage debate as it might encourage nasty elements in society.' It is entirely wrong-headed."

Former Today editor Rod Liddle agreed that the fundamental problem was not deliberate bias but an attitude that, "BBC staff would describe as civility and decency but can also be characterised as naivety". While Rod was editor of Today, he commissioned a piece from the then BBC social affairs reporter Bernie Choudhury on no-go areas for whites in Oldham. Bernie is now a principal lecturer at Lincoln University, and wrote in his blog in 2011 that "I was roundly condemned by some BBC colleagues for playing into the hands of the BNP – and called other names too – even though in every conversation I put in the caveats that it was a minority and possible bravado." Bernie Choudhury makes the case for a fearless approach to breadth of opinion, "If we castigate people for speaking out, no matter how uncomfortable their perception, we end up with frustrated people without a voice".

Steve Hewlett told us it would not surprise him, "to find that the BBC (and not just the BBC) would have seen an association between immigration and race. If you could identify a general corporate sensitivity, it would be in that area, which might even lead to a sort of collective blindness."

According to a former producer of Any Answers? who worked on the programme ten years ago, people ringing in to the telephonists who act as a first filter for the programme would probably have found that, if they said they wanted to come on air and say immigration was too high or was harming the country, they would not make it through to the next filter and on to air.

This was said to be partly a fear of having views that were considered unacceptable on the programme, and partly an understandable fear that contributors might go too far and say something which would cause offence – or indeed break the law. Andrew Green would no doubt say that someone who argues against immigration levels should not be

presumed to be a racist, and he would be right. However, even regular and experienced contributors can say things live on-air that they might not say if given time to consider, and perhaps it is not surprising that hard-pressed producers would err on the side of caution and filter out views which might easily trip over the line of acceptability. The difficult question is always about where that line should be drawn.

Journalists and producers wrestling with these dilemmas might take some comfort from some of the views expressed in the audience research. First, some claim to want to hear all views; "Everyone is entitled, even someone who represents the BNP. Let their views be heard: they will probably be shown up for what their view is" said an audience member from Northern Ireland. Second, where audience members hold "extreme" views themselves, then the absence of their opinion on the airways may lead them to suppose that their point of view is being actively suppressed by a "PC" organisation.

The audience is sufficiently sophisticated, the research suggests, to recognise that the BBC can manage to include "extreme" views by creating a calm, unthreatening climate for debate and that it balances those views out with the main strands of opinion in call-ins and debates.

Meanwhile, however, the very fact that items such as the one by Bernie Choudhury were being played on one of the BBC's flagship shows in 2001 demonstrates that the BBC was not wholly avoiding the difficult subjects, but Helen Boaden wanted things to improve further. In February 2005 she invited Sir Andrew Green into the BBC to speak to editors, and a year later he accepted an invitation from Boaden's (then) Deputy Stephen Mitchell to go in again to address editors in BBC Radio. Green says that on that occasion one editor had told him that the BBC was attacked by both sides whatever it did so that he had decided to do "whatever I like". Green does not question the commitment of Boaden and Mitchell to treat the subject of immigration fairly and appropriately, but does not believe that their determination filtered into the front-line.

I met with co-chairs of the Cross Party Group on Balanced Migration, MPs Frank Field and Nicholas Soames, who are unequivocal about what they believe is a bias within the BBC against discussing the subject of immigration in general, and in favour of immigration when it does. In common with many MPs, Field and Soames admit that their main appreciation of the BBC is via the Today programme, but claim that their appearances, or indeed of anyone representing their point of view, are few in relation to the importance of the topic they are raising. When they or colleagues with the same views do appear, they claim, they are sometimes treated by the interviewer in a more combative fashion than are their opponents. This is not a charge which is easily verified, especially as the complaint is frequently as much about the tone as it is about the actual words used.

In common with Green and Mehmet from Migration Watch, Field and Soames accept that mainstream politicians have been as guilty as they believe the BBC has been in their reluctance to raise the subject, but of course contend that this brings an additional onus on the BBC to find other ways to give voice to an issue which is so clearly of general popular concern. Essentially their case is not only that there were not enough voices being heard who opposed immigration, but that hardly any voices were being heard either for or against.

Three things happened within a relatively short period which appear to have made a significant difference to the level of debate over immigration, and hence the range of voices heard on the BBC and elsewhere. In April 2004, the then Head of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, broke a widely held taboo and declared publicly his belief that the policy of multiculturalism had not worked in Britain, and called on the Labour government to abandon it. Since no sensible person was likely to call Phillips a racist, this opened a floodgate of debate; suddenly it was possible to admit that there were problems associated with immigration and not necessarily be a racist. Phillips had done it, so perhaps others could too.

In October 2006 the former Labour Foreign Secretary Jack Straw caused headlines when he asked Muslim women attending his MP surgery in Blackburn to remove their veils so that he could see their faces when he was speaking to them. Again, whatever the merits of the argument, even Straw's most fierce critics were unlikely to accuse him of being a racist, and a healthy debate ensued.

Last, and perhaps most important of all, the influx of immigration from Poland and other parts of eastern Europe around the middle of the decade brought about a whole new dimension to the entire issue. Now it was possible to have a debate about the issues arising from immigration which are to do with homes and jobs and economics and diversity, without the subject of race coming up at all.

It seems to be common ground between those who oppose further immigration, and those in favour, that these three events were among the changes of circumstances which meant that mainstream politicians began to feel more free to speak on the subject of immigration, and more began to do so. Their comments, and the ensuing debate, seems to be reported more widely on the BBC than views on immigration before this time. Today, as we shall see, the subject of immigration is more frequently discussed in public life in general, and thence on the BBC. That having been said, however, even once the overall subject of immigration became less of a taboo, the content analysis undertaken for this review by Cardiff University found that coverage tended to focus on political infighting, such as for example the coverage of immigration backlog cases, and much more rarely on the larger social issues associated with immigration.

So is it a fair criticism to say that, in the absence of voices from mainstream politics willing to raise the subject in the early years of the decade, the BBC fell short of providing a satisfactory breadth of view on the subject of immigration? And that if this is so, is it fair to say that the BBC was at that time, failing to comply with its own standards of impartiality? This period precedes the scope of this review, but provides a relevant background to our findings.

I have discussed already that the scope of the content analysis associated with this report means that a number of its conclusions need context to be fully understood. However, perhaps the clearest finding of the analysis across 2007 and 2012 is what seems to be a heavy leaning in BBC News towards politicians as the original sources for, and contributors to, stories on immigration, religion in the UK and the UK's relationship to the EU. Mainstream politicians account for an average of no fewer than 52% of all sources in the periods sampled, with the next biggest group being "members of the public" at just 10%. Then came journalists, public sector workers, and so on.

Within the group of politicians cited as sources, it is perhaps not surprising that the overwhelmingly dominant voices were the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, followed by Cabinet, MPs and Shadow Cabinet members. However, such is the dominance of this senior group that it effectively crowds out not only non-politicians, but also other voices from lower down the ranks of their own number. In 2007 back-bench MPs accounted for just 5.7% of all political voices heard in the sample.

Indications of this weight given to Westminster voices are not confined to the content analysis. There was also a strong feeling emerging from the audience research associated with this review, that politicians were given too great a voice on the BBC. Most members of the public consulted felt that the views of politicians predominated and that this was not always desirable because, they thought, when politicians are felt to be over-represented, the BBC is more identified with "the establishment position". For example, under the last government, the establishment position was perceived to be pro-immigration, and the audience research tells us that some of them are still experiencing an over-hang from this perception. Association with an establishment position is a problematic thing for the BBC because it can cast doubt on its impartiality in general; for example, at the extreme, some Muslims appear to see the BBC point of view as associated with government and hence with American sympathies.

In summary, if the BBC was reliant on senior politicians for a majority of its sources, and these politicians were not reflecting the public mood about immigration, then it follows that the BBC may well have fallen short in this respect.

The BBC Executive has clearly acknowledged its shortcomings in this matter. In 2011 the Director-General, Mark Thompson, was interviewed for *New Statesman* magazine and he confessed that "I think there were some years when the BBC, like the rest of the UK media, was very reticent about talking about immigration... There was an anxiety whether or not you might be playing into a political agenda if you did items about immigration." He went on to say that he believed that the BBC had since improved, and indeed claimed that it had been responsible for raising the issue of British immigration during the 2010 election campaigns. "In the 2010 election campaign," he said, "none of the parties was talking about immigration. We believed we should deal with it, because the public – not everyone, but a significant proportion – was saying to us that it was a real issue." He said the BBC was more committed to reporting on contentious issues. "We've got a duty, even if issues are sensitive and difficult to get right, to confront what the public want. I don't like the idea of topics that are taboo."

So has the BBC's coverage of a suitable range of opinions on the subject of immigration improved since the Director-General made his comments? And is there a suitable "wagon wheel" of views reflected in BBC output?

Of course, the debate about immigration is not simply between those in favour of more and those in favour of less. Precisely the point about the "wagon wheel" is that there are many points of view on aspects of immigration on either side of the debate, with the most nuanced meeting somewhere on the wheel mid-way between "for and against". And indeed it is a widespread concern among those involved with this, and other matters of public controversy, that these more nuanced views tend to be edged out of the "Punch and Judy" approach of so many news and current affairs programmes. Perhaps the most

frequent complaint made in the course of compiling this report is that experts receive calls from BBC journalists asking if they are "in favour of slaying the first-born child in every family", and if they are generally in favour but have reservations, the journalist will respond that "I have to speak to my editor" and the phone does not ring again. Frequently journalists are seeking balance between opposing points of view, and a nuanced view may be fascinating but cannot be accommodated in the limited time available for debate.

This is essentially part of the difference between news on the one hand, and current affairs and other factual programmes on the other. While the requirement for balance within a fixed time constraint will often require a simple-confrontation between the "first-born slayers" and the more merciful in news coverage, it is incumbent on other long-form or single subject programming to explore the "wagon wheel" of opinions.

Some of these "spokes" to the broader debate about immigration will include issues of economics, social services, housing, education etc. There will also no doubt be concerns about multiculturalism and the nature of "Britishness", and of course that's not to mention the views of existing minorities. It would be a serious omission to overlook the effect of all this discussion on the millions of households occupied by immigrants to Britain or their descendants, and who pay their BBC licence fees just like everyone else.

Indeed, the views of immigrant communities within the audience research were clear. While they did find uncontrolled or aggressive anti-immigrant rhetoric distressing, they also generally acknowledged that such opinions were fully accessible elsewhere in society and the media. What they said they wanted is for the public debate in "flagship media" such as the BBC to move on from perception and possibly prejudiced emotional "opinion" towards a real debate based on statistics and facts. These groups, particularly Muslim Asians, said that they regarded factual-based debate as their best defence in the "dispelling of myths". They saw the role of the BBC as being to help everyone move towards a much fuller understanding of this controversial issue. However, all groups are also agreed that to be effective, these challenges need to be made more often in the most public and wide reaching flagship programmes – which they regard as being in particular the 6pm and also the 10pm news bulletins.

So is it fair to say, as some of the BBC's critics do, that its coverage assumes a disposition sympathetic to immigration, and that it excludes from the airwaves a range of the voices which might oppose aspects of it?

The first thing that needs to be said in response is that, such is the sheer volume and depth of BBC outlet through its national, regional and local services, TV, radio and online, that there is scarcely a generalised statement which can be made about its coverage which will turn out to be universally true. On the many occasions when I was told that "the BBC would never interview" this person or that person, a check would confirm that somewhere, at some recent time, such a person had indeed been interviewed. Programmes are made by a huge number of people and teams, both inside and outside the BBC. The Controller of Radio 4, Gwyneth Williams pointed out, "We commission programmes across a wide range of subject matter and from all imaginable perspectives. The aim is to deepen understanding and provide unexpected and enriching encounters across the network. We take programmes from well over 150 talented production teams

who bring their different expertise to Radio." Certainly the BBC can point to what seems to be a wide range of coverage of the topic of immigration, via news, current affairs, and factual. The catalogue is, of course, too lengthy to reproduce in full, but we can take a closer look at some examples.

Those who suspect a predetermined agenda in the BBC might have felt that they knew what to expect when they saw the billings for "The Day the Immigrants Left" by Leopard Films. In it, the producers decided upon a novel way to get behind the frequently asked question whether immigrants to Britain are taking jobs which would otherwise be taken by locals. Eleven British unemployed workers were recruited in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, to go into a range of different workplaces including a potato company, an asparagus farm, an Indian restaurant and a building site run by a local landlord. Alongside the experiment, presenter Evan Davis roamed the area trying to discover the real impact of the immigrants on schools and other social services, and whether or not foreign workers were financially a net contributor to the community.

Those already harbouring suspicions of a BBC "agenda" over immigration would suppose that the production team might have approached the subject with a conclusion in mind. One contributor on social media put it thus: "The point of what I'm saying is that we cannot KNOW if the programme is fair – we will never know whether they have picked the most incompetent local workers or not. But, from what I have seen of similar programmes in the past, I think I know what THEY will show! Do you REALLY think the BBC will say: 'So, British workers ARE better than immigrants'?"

Well, the results were startling, and were exactly as the online correspondent had expected. Even when asked to take part in a brief experiment, which they knew was being televised, the British-born workers either failed to turn up, or did turn up and were unable or unwilling to do the work.

I asked the then Commissioning Editor for Documentaries, recently appointed Controller of BBC One, Charlotte Moore, whether the producers had set out to cast locally born workers who were feckless and unreliable. Charlotte insisted that this was not so, and that the production team would have been equally happy if the programme had shown that locals were every bit as conscientious and industrious as the immigrants. Subsequently, in another context, I met a senior member of the production team who equally insisted that there was no preconceived agenda, and that the local workers were cast in good faith. It should also be said that there was no evidence on-screen of bias in the casting. One can only wonder what went through the mind of the producer when it was discovered on camera that the one local person (out of four) who actually did turn up for his first day's shift working at the Indian restaurant, had no idea how to put a knot in a necktie.

The programme was a huge success, both in terms of ratings and reviews, and is an excellent example of how the BBC can illuminate an important topic through an original and enterprising approach. The cliché that "they are taking all our jobs" turns out to be not quite as self-evident as it may seem. Of course, the programme said little or nothing about the many other aspects of immigration which cause concern, but no one programme can do everything.

Another side of public concerns about immigration was tackled on 21 January this year (2013). Panorama's "Immigration Undercover" was an equally enterprising and far more

traditional journalistic exercise. Reporter Paul Kenyon looked at the estimated half a million foreign migrants who are believed to be hiding from the authorities in the UK. Some are failed asylum seekers who live in graveyards and abandoned garages, or "disappear" within their own communities. The headline sequence alone might have reassured anyone inclined to believe that the BBC is "soft" on immigration; Kenyon is seen and heard asking an asylum seeker the question which so many would like to hear answered: "you've stabbed somebody, you've been in prison here, you've been in immigration detention centres. Can you tell me why the authorities still allow you to be here?" The programme goes on to identify and confront an asylum seeker believed to be from the Democratic Republic of Congo who appears to have fabricated his history, a number of people who came to Britain on student visas and who deliberately overstayed their permission, a woman from India who is illegally importing girls from the sub-continent to work as prostitutes, and finally Paul Kenyon bravely infiltrated and then confronted a criminal gang which was arranging for foreign criminals who are "on the run" to be smuggled out of Britain.

In both of these examples, the BBC has taken a widely believed view about aspects of immigration and held it up for examination. In the case of "they are taking our jobs", it found the situation to be less simple than the public perception might expect. In the case of "illegal immigration is out of control and needs to be curbed" they found the widespread public view to be acquitted by the facts.

Other Panoramas since March 2011 do not appear to show any hint that the producers are keen to be "soft on immigration"; rather the contrary. "My Big Fat Fake Wedding" was about sham immigrant weddings; "Breaking into Britain" was about illegal immigrant routes; "Britain's Child Beggars" investigated the exploitation of children by criminal gangs from Romania; "Britain's Secret Health Tourists" was about foreigners coming to Britain to use the NHS, and "Britain's Crimes of Honour", was about so-called "honour crimes" including murder. Taken in conjunction with other coverage of the subject on TV and radio, and it seems difficult to sustain the charge that the BBC is suppressing voices critical of aspects of immigration into the UK.

It has already been said that a number of the BBC's more influential audience and critics attach great importance to the Today programme. Today is a remarkable national institution, and its power in setting the agenda for the day's news is unique among the media. For this reason, for the purposes of this review, I also listened carefully to 25 items related to aspects of immigration which I could identify in the course of 2012. It would be exhausting either to write or to have to read a comprehensive analysis of all of them. It is a period when this aspect of the news was dominated by the allegation that large numbers of foreign students are coming to the UK with the stated intention of studying, and are either "bogus" from the outset or are overstaying their visas and going missing from the official register. This aspect comes up a number of times, in and among a range of other facets of the immigration debate in the period. The coverage is generally thorough, suitably journalistic, and excellent.

If there is a criticism to be made, it is perhaps that the coverage is largely dry and clinical, and more about statistics and the performance of the official agencies, than it is about the impact of all this on the wider community. Certainly, the content analysis indicates a strong emphasis on official reports, statistics and the political handling of immigration. It

shows that debates over immigration were usually framed by politicians, whose statements were often presented as "facts". In June 2012, the reporter Sanchia Berg reported on the effects of immigration on a part of London and Mark Easton did a piece for the programme following the census figures in December. These reports tended to be exceptions; what may be missing from the Today coverage is much sense of what the impact of immigration is on the ground. In the period reviewed, the people mainly expressing concern about immigration levels are Sir Andrew Green from Migration Watch, Jon Cruddas (Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham) and Peter Lilley (Conservative MP for Hitchin and Harpenden). Given its importance as an issue to the country at large, perhaps Today's reporters might have been used more extensively not just to illustrate and enliven but to examine and underpin the stories. Longer pieces about pressure on services, on land, on cultural stresses and changes would also create their own, off-diary, stories, allowing the programme to rely less on following the newspaper or newsgathering diary agenda. Looking at the list of items purely in terms of the arithmetic, the balance of voices heard seems to be in favour of those who are content with current levels and rates of immigration, rather than those who want less.

Of course, there is no need for viewers and listeners to remain as passive members of the BBC audience. There are the comments pages online, Twitter for the concise contributor and phone-ins or live TV audience shows. This is perhaps where the BBC tries to ensure its airwaves include the fullest range of opinion and, crucially, where it often moves furthest away from the Westminster Voice. 5 Live is the station with the greatest sense of a constant flow of listener opinion and reaction. Your Call uses live guests to provide information and spark reaction. The edition on 1 March this year, for example, asked whether UKIP was a party of protest or a real force in British politics and took calls from a chair of a local UKIP branch, from someone else who worried the main parties no longer represented the people; from a caller worried about immigration; from another concerned that Britain was sinking into a cultural abyss and from someone else who enjoyed travelling and European culture and said they would never vote UKIP. On 23 November 2012 another edition asked whether the UK's contribution to the EU budget was worth it. Listeners who want to get involved don't have to be a fan of 5 Live: other options are Jeremy Vine on Radio 2, Any Answers? and Call You and Yours on Radio 4. Indeed, the radio phone-ins on 5 Live and Radio 2 and Call Kaye (BBC Radio Scotland) were particularly singled out for praise in the audience research, for their uncensored and relevant breadth of opinion, original and topical subject matter and "for asking the common man's questions". Also the audience said they felt that breadth of view was particularly successful and present in local broadcasting (radio).

So are producers of BBC phone-in programmes as reluctant to put on-air views which oppose immigration, as their counterparts on Any Answers? are said to have been ten years ago? The episodes of Your Call and others mentioned above appear to demonstrate that on subjects like immigration and the EU, the network's producers *are* willing to put on air a broad range of opinion, though the increased airing of these debates in the political arena in recent years must, as I have already said, make including controversial views on phone-ins easier to do. Much rests on the judgement and skill of the presenter and producer – they need the confidence to know that they can put the more extreme views on air if they are ready and able to pull the fader down and move on if things go too far.

Each of Nicholas Soames, Frank Field, Alp Mehmet and Sir Andrew Green accepts that the subject of immigration is more readily discussed and heard on the BBC in latter years than when they began expressing concern. None, of course, believes that what they claim is the BBC bias in favour of immigration has vanished.

This is perhaps not surprising. Many will be aware of the fascinating body of research which shows that our perception of bias in others is influenced by how strongly we feel on any subject ourselves.<sup>2</sup> The more to the right I am, the more to the left you seem to be. If I read something in a newspaper which I feel has the same political outlook as I do, it will seem less biased than reading the same article in a publication I regard as the enemy. Immigration is one of those topics which arouses strong feelings on all sides, and the BBC's treatment of which will feel emblematic of its broader outlook. If I expect the BBC to be biased on a particular subject, I am more likely to see bias when I look for it. Mindful of John Bridcut's fifth Guiding Principle, that impartiality is not an excuse for insipid programming, the BBC may feel "on a hiding to nothing" for any robust programming they produce on the subject – because public expectations may be that the BBC is predisposed in favour of immigration. The remark by the editor who reportedly told Sir Andrew Green that the BBC was attacked by both sides whatever it did so he had decided to do "whatever I like", will echo with many.

However, being criticised equally by both sides may once have seemed to some to be an acceptable defence for a journalist seeking to be impartial – today it will no longer suffice. BBC journalists are obliged to be impartial across the board and to be seen to be so. It remains a problem for the BBC, therefore, that, while some critics view the BBC as hostile to traditional left-wing views, many of its more vociferous critics believe that the organisation is largely run by people of a similar political, educational and social background, who can be described as belonging to what John Bridcut described as a "liberal consensus". Even the BBC's severest critics would concede that there are exceptions, perhaps many of them, but still insist that the latter criticism is a generally fair comment.

John Bridcut talked about a "shared comfort zone" and said his report had relied on the assertions (in private and in public) by BBC staff that what might be expected in a large organisation – a "group think" – was not peculiarly absent at the BBC. My own conversations with BBC staff did not lead me to think that position had substantially changed. The most important thing to note, clearly, is the conviction shared by almost everyone I spoke to in the BBC that whatever the private leanings of staff, they do not impact upon their journalism.

Both aspects of the point have been made eloquently by the BBC's former Political Editor Andrew Marr who, while he accepted in the research for John Bridcut's report that the BBC has an "innate liberal bias", added the rather vivid thought that "the first thing that happens to you as a BBC journalist is that you're taken down into a dank basement to have your trousers pulled down and your organs of opinion removed with a pair of secateurs by the Director-General and popped in a formaldehyde bottle. You're told you're allowed them back when you leave."

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<sup>2</sup> <https://psych.princeton.edu/psychology/research/pronin/pubs/Pronin%20Gilovich%20Ross.pdf>

Few would have any reason to doubt these good intentions; however, BBC journalists, like the rest of us, are fallible, and so their critics are bound to wonder whether it is indeed possible for private opinions to remain totally irrelevant to professional judgements – especially when determining the “assumed consensus” which we have already discussed. Equally importantly, we have seen that expectations regarding standards of impartiality within the BBC are high, and that any perception that there is a natural inclination within its journalism in one direction or another, can be damaging.

When asked about its coverage of immigration stories and the charge of “political correctness” within the BBC on this subject, the Executive gave some examples of its coverage. The first, from the relatively recent past, was the piece by BBC Home Editor Mark Easton on the Today programme on 20 February 2013 on the phenomenon known as “white flight”. Contributors to the Today package included Professor Danny Dorling from Sheffield University (dubbed by Simon Jenkins as “Geographer Royal by Appointment to the Left”) and former Labour MP Oona King; perhaps not a perfect example of balance between differing points of view, or of a range of opinions. Mark’s thesis can perhaps best be understood by referring directly to his blog on the subject from the same day:

“Something quite remarkable happened in London in the first decade of the new millennium. The number of white British people in the capital fell by 620,000 – equivalent to the entire population of Glasgow moving out.

The consequence, as revealed by the latest census, is that white Brits are now in a minority in London, making up just 45% of its residents.

So where have they gone to – and why did they leave?

I’ve been analysing and mapping the census data, and what emerges is a much more positive story than some headlines would make you think.

The movement of the white British is often characterised as white flight – the indigenous population forced out of their neighbourhoods by foreign migrants. That may be part of the story, but I think the evidence suggests it is also about working class aspiration and economic success.”

Mark’s theme seemed to be that it has long been the aspiration of city-dwellers to move out to greener pastures, and that increasing prosperity over a number of years has made this attainable for many of London’s indigenous people. There is no reason whatever to suppose that Mark’s analysis is not, as he indicates, at least a part of the story; however, that’s not how his report was seen by sections of the audience. At the last count there were reported to be something in the region of 2000 comments from the public on Mark’s interpretation of the exodus, and it seems that the majority of them disagreed with him. Among those complaining was Sir Andrew Green from Migration Watch, who wrote to Helen Boaden, then Director, News, now Director, Radio, as follows:

“Dear Helen,  
I hope you will not mind my expressing disappointment at the handling of this topic today which seemed to be blind to the real concerns of the public. Mark Easton, and especially his blog which concluded that white flight from London is ‘a story of aspiration ... a story of success’, was almost a parody. This

kind of talk certainly weakens the BBC's authority and credibility with many members of the public."

In the course of interviewing for this report, I found Mark Easton to be one of the BBC journalists who is most frequently noted for his breadth of knowledge, his industriousness, thoroughness and professionalism. Though he clearly indicates that Londoners "being forced out of their neighbourhoods by foreign migrants ... may be part of the story", many of his audience believed that they heard something different. This may be another example of people perceiving bias in places where they expect to find bias, but equally, it underlines the need for BBC reporters to take even greater care than usual to anticipate potential responses and provide the full context when reporting on these sensitive areas.

I heard what some critics might regard as an even bigger journalistic "hostage to fortune" which gave rise to the following contribution to the "Biased BBC" website on 12 December 2012.

"The BBC's Danny Shaw on Victoria Derbyshire's show (1 hr 37 minutes) did a piece on Theresa May's immigration speech ... his report was pretty balanced and even managed to put Labour in the frame for their immigration policy... What was surprising was Shaw's reaction to May making the connection between housing problems and immigration... He said...

*'She also referred to something I hadn't heard before ... she said immigration had actually increased housing demand in Britain... 1/3 of new housing being built for immigrants and housing might be 10% cheaper if it were not for this extra demand.'*

He's got to be kidding right? He'd never made a link between housing shortages and mass immigration? He must listen to the BBC for his news ... it is rare to never when the BBC makes that connection ... how many 'debates' on housing shortages and the need to build more houses for the mysteriously growing population have avoided any mention at all of immigrants on the BBC? Many many many.

Still ... maybe this report is the start of a new open and honest attempt to bring us the news as it is not as the BBC would like you to hear it."

It would be unfair to omit the fact that these two pieces, by Mark Easton and Danny Shaw are among a huge range and depth of coverage of the topic of immigration, in news and current affairs programmes on TV and radio, network and local. Between them they provide an impressive range of views and approaches. Perhaps the BBC's best response to reservations about Mark Easton's piece would be found from Vanessa Feltz's phone-in on BBC Radio London, in which Vanessa asked her phone-in audience the question: "How has your London changed in the last decade? Can it be said to be for the better? Is London more vibrant, more dynamic, more interesting with better food; or nothing like the city you grew up in, full of people speaking languages you don't understand and selling food you've never heard of? If you are white British, how does it feel to be a minority in your own city?"

Needless to say, taking into account the breadth and depth of BBC coverage of immigration, through news, current affairs, and online, we are likely to find examples which appear to give more weight to one direction or another. Taking only the agenda of the recent programmes from Panorama, one might easily conclude that the BBC is strongly biased against immigration. We have seen above some other examples which might suggest the opposite.

This wider point – about what some critics believe is the divergence of outlook between the generality of BBC journalists and the generality of the public they serve – can readily be illuminated by a comparison of the output between BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio 5 Live. Whereas relatively high proportions of the voices heard on news and current affairs programmes on BBC Radio 4 will be politicians and other public figures, significant sections of the daily output of Radio 5 Live are driven by audience phone-ins. The Head of News for 5 Live, Stephen Mawhinney, thinks his network, “was probably slightly ahead of the game [in providing a real breadth] as it is probably the most interactive bit of BBC news and most connected to its audience. We hear a constant dialogue and get a sense of which stories really engage the audience. It is becoming more commonplace now in the rest of BBC News but 5 Live pioneered that.” Anyone who ever produces or conducts such phone-ins will tell you instantly that the general audience is far more concerned with the subject of immigration than are what we might call “the chattering classes”, and indeed that they are far more concerned about the problems and issues arising from the subject than some of what they hear and see on the BBC might indicate.

This all adds up to the need to underline the importance for the BBC not only of being impartial, but of seeming to be so. At times when politicians may not be reflecting the totality of the public mood – as has been the case with immigration – this may be more than averagely difficult to do. In the absence of any mainstream political party with what opponents of further immigration would accept is a serious policy designed to reduce it significantly, and given the emphasis on political voices, the will and effort necessary to find and cast an opponent in discussions about immigration is likely to be considerable. Furthermore, since a policy which would significantly reduce immigration is not on the radar of anyone likely to achieve political office in the foreseeable future, why discuss it? Most interviews and debates arising from the agenda of daily politics will be to do with how we deal with issues arising from existing and likely future policies on aspects of immigration, rather than the broader questions about curtailing immigration generally. This is in summary what the BBC's critics believe happens at the BBC, which is why even today, the debate we hear on the BBC may not reflect the wider public mood. It is also why a general theme of this report will be the essential need for continuing vigilance throughout the editorial process, in checking in-built assumptions behind the story and the voices heard in telling it.

The still wider point which arises for the BBC is the phenomenon which has been identified and addressed in previous reports on impartiality, and is the extent to which the BBC's overall daily news agenda is driven and sometimes dominated by politicians. It goes without saying that politicians are elected by the people, and that their viewpoints must to be given appropriate reflection on the BBC airwaves. In this case, however, as we have seen, politicians for many years did not want to talk much about immigration, and as a result the BBC did not talk much about immigration. This despite the fact that there was

plenty of evidence available that the subject was causing concern to large sections of the community; from people who were not racists, but who were worried about pressure on schools, the NHS, housing, unemployment and other aspects of economic and social policy. Such concerns would have been expressed by pressure groups, by local councillors, by teachers, by doctors, and any time the subject came up in phone-ins or on the letters pages of local newspapers.

Precisely this same issue, and the need to achieve a more appropriate balance and breadth of opinion, was addressed eloquently six years ago in one of the Guiding Principles of the 2007 report by John Bridcut. "Impartiality must continue to be applied to matters of party political or industrial controversy. But in today's more diverse political, social and cultural landscape, it requires a wider and deeper application. Today's political and cultural landscape has changed dramatically. Voter turnout has been in decline, party politics seem much less sharply defined, and the UK Parliament competes with other centres of democratic expression. The internet, blogs and online petitions demonstrate that contemporary political activity may have moved away from the party political arena. Impartiality today needs to embrace a broader range of opinion."

The challenge for the BBC must be to seek ways to sharpen the antennae which are tuned into these wider concerns of the community, and perhaps to be more ready to bypass the Westminster agenda on occasions when it fails to reflect significant swathes of opinion; a nudge in attention away from Westminster, towards people from other walks of life whom we may find are every bit as capable as are politicians of giving expression to important aspects of the public mood.

## The European Union

If mainstream politicians have sometimes preferred to stay silent on the subject of immigration for fear of being abused as racists, many have also chosen to remain silent on the subject of the EU for a different reason. The European Union has long been a difficult area for the three main UK parties – partly because of a general antipathy among voters to what can quickly seem to be a dense and complex subject, and more especially because it is the cause of divisions within each of them. One had only to live through the troubles experienced by the John Major government over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty to realise how traumatic the subject of Europe can be for the Conservative party in particular. Though perhaps not quite so deep and destructive, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have had, and continue to have, their divisions.

We have seen that the agenda driving BBC news and current affairs can seem to some to be imbalanced in favour of mainstream politicians, and if this was the case on the topic of immigration, it may be even more so in the case of the EU. The content analysis associated with this report indicates the dominance of Westminster political voices among sources for items within BBC News about Europe, and that the overwhelming majority of these sources are from the two main parties. Across 2007 and 2012, politicians accounted for more than seven out of ten sources, and were used almost ten times as frequently as the second-largest source category – media and journalist sources. It is perhaps not surprising that the majority of sources for stories on the EU are politicians, but the

dominance of political sources meant that there were fewer opportunities for non-party political opinions to be expressed. The sources used in this sample were also the least reflective of the population overall with respect to gender and ethnicity. In 2007, 95.5% of sources were white, rising to 98.8% in 2012. The sample was also heavily male-dominated; in 2007 men accounted for 93.4% of sources, decreasing to 78.1% in 2012.

This being so, it is to be expected that those in favour of a vigorous debate on the subject of British withdrawal from the EU believe that the BBC, in the past at least, has not given it the coverage it merits. Such debate as there has been, they claim, has been weighted to discussion between those who generally agree that the UK should remain in the EU, albeit with renegotiated terms. The "withdrawalist" tendency has, it is claimed, had more popular support within the country than has been reflected either by politicians, or in the news.

There can be no doubt that the "withdrawalist" tendency has long been substantial and has been growing. A Guardian/ICM poll carried out in late December 2012 found that if offered a referendum on Britain's membership – as proposed by David Cameron – a slight majority – 51% – of respondents "would vote to take Britain out of the EU, against just 40% who say they would vote to stay in". By contrast, a 2001 ICM poll, using a slightly different worded question, indicated that 68% of respondents wanted Britain to remain a member of the EU (<http://m.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/26/euroscpticism-growing-voters-poll>).

Growing opposition to the EU is not, however, the main challenge facing the BBC or other press and media who share a mission to explain and inform their audiences. The main enemy is apathy. As the BBC Head of Political Research, David Cowling put it, "The great majority of people don't think about it ... is it something that gets them out of bed? No." Cowling was commenting on Ipsos MORI's monthly tracking of public attitudes, which shows very low levels of public interest compared to other subjects such as immigration or the economy. In the latest edition, published in April 2013, the EU is not in the top ten issues at all, despite the relatively high profile of the Union as a story in recent months.

However, one of the many joys of audience research is that it is often self-contradictory and, sure enough, those questioned as part of the research associated with this review told us that, although they did sometimes find the EU a daunting subject, they were very much aware that they would want to make their own, informed decision about voting for or against European membership at some point in the future. In the face of all this contrary evidence, perhaps it is not too paternalistic or patronising to conclude that it is the BBC's job to inform the public of what they need to know in a democracy, whether they like it or not!

So, how has the BBC been doing?

If it is Migration Watch which has appointed itself as a watchdog monitoring BBC coverage of immigration, then its equivalent on the subject of Europe is Global Britain – an organisation dedicated to proselytising the case for UK withdrawal from the EU. Global Britain has focused a laser-like beam on the Today programme in particular, and has devised an elaborate method of monitoring its coverage of Europe through a series of arithmetical metrics. It is, of course, invidious to seek to match a level of public concern about a subject with its coverage on a news programme, and indeed the pure arithmetic

is unlikely to be a very helpful way of measuring bias. However, while once again it does not seem to be a good use of time to seek to check the precise numbers produced by Global Britain, even taking into account the possibility of a huge margin of error, they seem to present a prima facie case that the withdrawalist argument has not been reflected on the morning airwaves on Radio 4 in a proportion consistent with the popular appeal of the proposal. The BBC, of course, strongly denies this.

While not conceding any particular charge against the Today programme specifically, members of the senior editorial team at the BBC have, as we shall see, acknowledged that the BBC was late in reflecting popular concern in this area. Having said which, we should of course also be careful to include the view of Charles Grant, Director of the Centre for European Reform, "I feel as a moderate pro-European that the BBC sometimes goes too far to bend backwards to appease the sceptics." Indeed, the Cardiff content analysis shows that even if coverage tended to focus on important ongoing news stories – such as those around the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, and the negotiations over the EU budget in 2012, rather than larger questions around potential withdrawal – the Eurosceptic position tended to receive more than ample hearing through the inclusion of politicians' views.

As was the case with immigration, there is a case to be made that the groundswell of public opinion eventually did find its expression through politicians – notably through the rise and increasing success of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and that this has had the effect of making the "in-out" debate more mainstream. There is a general acceptance at senior levels within the BBC that it may have been slow to report the growing popular disquiet among the UK public about membership of the EU. Director Editorial Policy and Standards, David Jordan told us: "We began to realise we hadn't 'got' Euroscepticism. This was for an interesting reason – that our coverage tended to be focused on political parties, and if *they* agreed on the issue there wasn't a mechanism for getting the Eurosceptic voice on air." However, Jordan and others believe that latterly it has caught up and is now accurately reflecting the breadth of debate among politicians as well as the wider community.

Let us see if this is so.

As we discussed on the subject of immigration, getting a balance between "for" and "against" is only a part of the responsibility facing the BBC. If there is complexity in the "wagon wheel" of opinions concerning immigration, then the number of interlocking and overlapping spokes which characterise the debate over Europe presents an even more difficult challenge. Indeed it may be instructive to consider the scale of the task facing the BBC in successfully providing a full "wagon wheel" of views in its coverage of Europe. Take a deep breath.

Leaving aside for a moment the basic "for" and "against" positions referred to above, we start with the fact that there is an entire Westminster perspective on every aspect of EU business, and an entire Brussels perspective on the same business. Both in turn have their own complexities, which include different voices representing powerful interests, expressed via the various arms of government, elected politicians and bureaucrats, and quangos. All of these overlap and interweave, so that frequently it may be far from obvious whether a story should best be covered from London or from Brussels, and that's

not to mention the 26 other capital cities which will have their own perspective on major matters. The story may then be about economics, federalism, defence, agriculture, social policy, justice – indeed any aspect of our evermore complex lives which are touched on by the EU, and once again there may be as many as 27 national views on any important topic before we get to what the Institutions of the EU itself think. There is the question of what “we” think about “them”, and sometimes it may not occur to us that it is equally important to know what “they” think about “us”, and again, that’s not to mention that sometimes it is necessary to know what “they” think about “each other”. It all adds up to quite a three-dimensional wagon wheel, and all this in nightly bulletins of TV news at Six and News at Ten where there is room for coverage of just ten stories per day.

The responsibility for delivering against this demanding brief is shared by all BBC journalists, but especially between teams at Westminster and in Brussels. However, the man most squarely in the cross-hairs of this debate is the BBC Europe Editor, Gavin Hewitt, and his perspective is, of course, instructive.

Hewitt’s role as BBC Europe Editor is itself one of the results of an earlier enquiry into the BBC’s coverage of the EU, carried out in 2005 by Lord Wilson. It was at that time seen as essential that a single editorial figure should be empowered to take an overview of EU coverage, helping to ensure an appropriate balance between Westminster and Brussels perspectives, and that a suitable range of voices and opinions were reflected in wider coverage. This is not an easy thing to achieve – not least because, unlike the Middle East Editor, Jeremy Bowen, who is based in London) Hewitt is based in Brussels. Not only does this make it more difficult for him to be able to monitor the widespread coverage of the EU across BBC outlets, but perhaps it also puts him slightly “at arm’s length” from the editorial decision-making process which decides priorities.

Hewitt’s primary focus in a very busy life is in setting the main news-driven agenda, especially for the bulletins and programmes of record. He is another of those at senior level within the BBC who accept that the reluctance of mainstream politicians to discuss Europe may have contributed to some slowness within the BBC to catch up with the importance of the current debate about the possibility of UK withdrawal. Those who were sceptical over the single-currency were given insufficient prominence, he believes, which may be one of the reasons that they are so exercised about being heard properly today. However, Hewitt believes that there was a Europe-story before the current economic crisis, and a different story now. What may once have been essentially a series of frequently unrelated reports about many different aspects of membership of the EU, has effectively become a “running story” of existential importance to the EU. The challenge of reporting the sometimes mind-boggling complexities of the economic debate, against the background of the network of structures and interweaving points of view outlined above, has been considerable.

So far as daily and weekly news coverage is concerned, Hewitt’s approach is pragmatic, and applies equally to developing BBC coverage of other complex subjects. It can be summarised as “here is what you absolutely need to know, put as simply and concisely as I know how to express it” in the bulletins and news programmes of record, and “anyone who wants to know more can follow me on my blog and in other places”. In a complex world, where the average of three minutes available at 6pm or 10pm is insufficient to tell

more than the bones of a difficult story, the availability of a hierarchy of outlets becomes so much more important.

We have seen previously, and it is widely accepted, that constraints of time and busy news agendas means that the bulletins themselves will rarely get much opportunity to go far beyond the "Punch and Judy" binary arguments and spokesmen. However, in the period since the crisis in the Eurozone has thrust the EU to the top of the daily news agenda, Hewitt's blog has been particularly important to those who wish to know more of the background behind the headlines of his news reports. The blog enables him, he says, to quote voices and opinions from other areas within the EU which could not plausibly be expected to be heard in main on-air bulletins. Such are the complexities and nuances inherent in the nature of the crisis, that the opportunity to expound at greater length than is possible on-air has been invaluable. The most cursory review of Hewitt's blog throughout the period confirms its value in this respect. Sometimes there can be 200-300 responses by the end of the day.

Having said that it is always going to be difficult to provide a full range of voices beyond Westminster and Brussels on the news programmes of record; the BBC News Channel provides an important space for a wider range of voices to be heard, and indeed has a specific duty to connect with voices in the regions and nations. I spoke to the Channel's Controller, who also edits BBC News at One. Sam Taylor did not, "think it is fair to say we have not represented sceptic voices over a long length of time", though he admitted there was still a need to make UK coverage less Westminster-orientated. "The range of interviewees is very high up my agenda, I talk to my output editors about it on a daily basis. I am loath to apply a mathematical approach but the question that I am pushing people to think harder about is – are they finding interesting people to put on air? We try to be less opportunistic now about how we get a range of contributors."

Taylor cited as an example the way the Channel approached the Prime Minister's landmark speech on Europe in January 2013. "The backbone of output came from pre-planned work with a booker and a duty editor to ensure we had planned in advance a clear range of views in the political dimension. The challenge on the day was to find who was going to do the 'stay in the EU' argument." In the event, that day's coverage on the News Channel did indeed include contributions from a wide range of politicians, and correspondent Fiona Trott seems to have been kept busy vox-popping a number of businessmen and industrialists.

The Cameron speech referred to by Sam Taylor was much anticipated, and much delayed. Described by John Humphrys on Today as "perhaps the most important speech of David Cameron's career so far", it followed a busy period for EU-related news and I decided to look at coverage by some flagship programmes in the run-up to the speech: the Radio 4 sequence programmes (Today, The World at One, PM, and The World Tonight), the News at Ten and Newsnight, Jeremy Vine on Radio 2 and Breakfast, Your Call and Drive on 5 Live.

This was a story centred on a Westminster politician, so it was perhaps inevitable that the voices of politicians dominated, with some of the same names recurring regularly. Numerically, those who supported staying in the EU outnumbered those who wanted to leave but, as the content analysis undertaken at Cardiff has found, the EU was largely

presented as a problem to be dealt with, and many of the pro EU voices wanted to see the Institution reformed. The World at One, Today and Newsnight made substantial efforts to include a range of opinion from Europe, whilst Newsnight included the voices of a businessman, a junior doctor, a farmer and a haulier. It then went back to hear again from them to get their reactions after the speech. Debate was framed by informed opinion and became, perhaps inevitably, a three-way affair between UK politicians, business people and European politicians.

However, coverage of the EU on the BBC is by no means confined to news and news-related online services and it would not, of course, be appropriate to require the BBC to include a withdrawalist point of view in every programme which examines any aspect of the EU. The BBC can and does point to what seems to be an impressively wide range of programming in which it has examined the EU from different angles.

Last year on BBC Two, for example, Robert Peston examined the costs of the dream of monetary union (The Great Euro Crash, 17 May), while self-confessed, "confirmed Eurosceptic" Michael Portillo travelled to Greece for a programme which included a very broad range of local opinion and which questioned the survival of the EU (Michael Portillo's Great Euro Crisis, 9 May). Meanwhile, John Humphrys followed in his footsteps six weeks later in another programme which included a wide variety of Greek voices (Panorama, Life and Debt: A Greek Tragedy, 25 June). Andrew Neil questioned Britain's application of European human rights laws (Rights Gone Wrong, 14 March), and Panorama looked at whether the EU's vast farming subsidy system was working (The Money Farmers, 5 March 2012), broadly concluding that it was not – the introduction to the programme asked the very direct question, "why are we paying out millions of pounds in public money and asking for virtually nothing in return?" Meanwhile Radio 4's contribution included The Bill for Brussels, in which File on 4 looked at the cost of the EU (12 February 2013), while Evan Davis hosted The EU Debate (8 August) in which former UK Permanent Representative to the EU Sir Stephen Wall faced the arguments of four persuasive Eurosceptics. Radio 4's Analysis looked at what it called Eurogeddon (on 13 February and 25 June), Edward Stourton tried to find out how widespread Euroscepticism was in the Labour Party and James Landale examined the reasons for the rise in British Euroscepticism (This Eurosceptic Isle, 25 February 2013).

Although MPs and MEPs featured heavily in these current affairs pieces, their greater length allowed more space for other voices, such as bloggers (The EU debate), union leaders (The Bill for Brussels), property developers and land reform campaigners (The Money Farmers). In Rights Gone Wrong, Andrew Neil discussed leaving the European Union and warned viewers not to let "the politicians or the judges or the lawyers fudge the issue ... it IS a stark choice, which we have to face up to".

In 2012, Today sent Evan Davis to the UKIP conference in Birmingham and carried what was for Today, an unusually long package. Evan reminded listeners in the introduction that UKIP might well be the largest party at the next European elections (in 2014) and went on to interview a healthy mix of conference attendees. UKIP representatives appeared on Question Time panels five times in the six months from October 2012 and twice on Radio 4's Any Questions? EU budget negotiations and calls for a referendum and the Euro zone crisis, put the EU high up the news agenda in the final months of 2012 and the leader of the UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage, was back on Question Time in

January this year. Since then, coverage of the Eastleigh by-election in February and of May's local elections led to a noticeable increase in UKIP appearances.

Perhaps the one thing which could be said about the above list of programmes and items is that much of the non-political opinion originated last year from outside the UK. If News was included in the above list, non-politicians from countries like Spain and Italy would feature more heavily perhaps than non-politicians from the UK talking about the EU. Public opinion in the UK might be moving on whether or not to stay in the EU, but the big EU story was happening outside the UK, in countries directly involved in the Euro crisis.

On BBC News Online, Democracy Live provides coverage of the European Parliament, including all its plenary sessions, and Politics Europe forms a 30 minute segment of the Daily Politics. The BBC's challenge, though, is to make the subject an interesting and approachable one. If a broad breadth of opinion is to be included when covering the story, the broadcaster first needs to ensure the viewer, listener or reader understands the story and why it matters. The complexity of the subject matter, already referred to several times in this report, came up as an important theme recently when the BBC was called to account for its coverage by Parliament.

Westminster's EU Scrutiny Committee, under the chairmanship of Bill Cash, heard from three senior BBC managers, including Peter Knowles, Controller of BBC Parliament. Knowles was asked why the channel did not do more to cover the work of the Committee in scrutinising EU legislation. In the discussion he referred in his response to a Committee hearing that had been covered by BBC Parliament, which had heard evidence from the Home Office Minister, James Brokenshire.

Knowles quoted part of the minister's contribution to the hearing: "That is why ECJ jurisdiction and the implications of some form of preliminary ruling or indeed infraction proceedings arising from these measures are some of the key elements that we are examining as part of the analysis. As I am sure you will appreciate, this is a complex, multifaceted piece of work. It is not simply the Home Office; it covers a number of different Departments that have an interest in these pre-Lisbon matters.' I have read it two or three times, and I am still not sure what he meant. There is no chance of a viewer at first hearing grasping that."

While the increasing use of tools such as Gavin Hewitt's blog and other online services can help to explain and simplify some of the unavoidable complexities of reporting the EU story, it remains an everyday challenge for the BBC to make the subject of the EU accessible to wider audiences. Indeed, Cardiff's analysis of the BBC demonstrates that key news and current affairs programmes provided limited contextual information about the EU – for example, in terms of the substance of the EU budget and the pros and cons of EU investment policy – and instead focused mainly on political sparring. Equally important for the BBC is to guard against becoming so immersed in the minutiae of sometimes Kafkaesque debate within the EU, that they lose sight of perspectives from the wider world. We have already seen that the dominant driver of the daily news agenda is Westminster, where the BBC places some of its most influential editors, and where in the past they found few front-line politicians in favour of withdrawal and willing to talk about it. The BBC also has a team in Europe, where equally few people wanted to talk about the possibility of withdrawal. Indeed, if a BBC correspondent is reporting from a European

summit, the debate will most probably be entirely about aspects of business within the EU and the UK relationship with it: few people at such a gathering are likely to be arguing that the UK would be better off not to be there at all. There is an ever-present danger that living and working in these environments can lead to a sort of "Stockholm syndrome" in which correspondents inadvertently become unduly sympathetic to their captors.

Anyone harbouring the view about the BBC that it is by instinct in favour of EU membership, albeit with reservations, might have felt that they had their suspicions reinforced by listening to the excellent three-part series on Europe presented on Radio 4 by Allan Little. Broadcast on three consecutive weeks in January and February 2012, the first programme (Reshaping Europe) was an absolutely fascinating analysis of the modern history and political importance of the EU post the fall of the Berlin Wall; the second programme (Breaking the Pact) gave an equally fascinating and insightful perspective on the consequences of the failure of the EU to enforce the "Stability and Growth Pact"; and the final programme (Deeper Not Wider), argued powerfully the case for Britain to play a far more active role in the future shaping of Europe, on the basis that the job would otherwise be done by Germany, which does not want to do it. The themes of the series were revisited at the end of the year, two days before Christmas, in another excellent programme by Allan Little entitled "Europe Moves East," in which Allan gained remarkable access to a whole range of very senior political and academic figures with specialist knowledge of aspects of Europe which we seldom hear reported. Altogether it explained brilliantly some of the serious fault lines in the structure of the EU, and the case for the UK playing a bigger and more dynamic role in addressing significant problems; however, in four programmes all about Britain's role in the EU, there was not a single voice expressing the view that the UK would be better off out. You could almost hear the groans from the withdrawalist camp.

So, does all this add up to a suitable breadth of voice in the BBC's coverage of Europe? Such is the weight and depth of coverage, that perhaps the only way to judge is to put oneself into the position of a BBC licence fee payer seeking to inform him- or herself about the European Union and its impact on the UK. How would I fare? The answer, of course, depends on how deep I am prepared to dig in my search: do I tune in to my regular programmes and hope enough information and opinion comes my way, or do I consciously search out a greater range of content? The BBC Trust's previous review of impartiality, on the events known as the Arab Spring, found something interesting with its focus groups: "Most respondents claimed to be using a range of news sources, both in terms of brands and platforms. The internet was an important source for many and the primary channel for younger audiences who reported using both mobile apps and fixed connections to access the news online. The roles of social and traditional media appears to be beginning to merge online, with audiences both consuming social media content on broadcasters' sites and broadcaster content on social media sites. It appears from the research that engaged audiences are 'triangulating' their different news sources and seeking a range of perspectives in order to decipher from a variety of angles. Thus, while the onus is still on broadcasters to provide high quality coverage, responsibility for determining the 'truth' appears to be shared with engaged audiences."

If I am a listener prepared to put in some of my own work, there can be little doubt that the BBC provides a hugely rich source of information and opinion. BBC News provides an

endless stream of stories and opinions about the future of the Euro, the EU budget and Britain's place in the EU, to name the three main stories of 2012. As has already been suggested, Westminster and political voices dominate this part of content, perhaps inevitably, though with a number of European and business voices included. I may also catch one of the current affairs programmes commissioned to keep me informed about the state of the EU, several of which are outlined above.

Online, the keen student can, amongst other things, enjoy a BBC "Big Stories" seminar on the EU and the Eurozone; watch an Irish MEP describe a typical day in the life of a European Parliamentarian, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8027602.stm>; learn from a (slightly out-of-date) series of mini-talks by former Europe Editor Mark Mardell about the workings of the EU institutions; watch, on Democracy Live, MP Bill Cash talk about how scrutiny of EU legislation could be improved <http://www.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/europe-21533645>; listen to EU agriculture ministers set out their position on farm subsidies at a press conference; and watch Andrew Neil on Politics Europe discuss the EU Parliament's rejection of the EU budget deal with Conservative MEP Vicky Ford and UKIP's Godfrey Bloom, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/europe-21830300>.

What this adds up to is that with a complex subject in a complex world, as is the EU, the average viewer and listener is unlikely to find as much breadth of opinion as is available merely by watching and listening to the mainstream bulletins. Even the Today programme, with its three hours of discussion time available, cannot do justice to the full range of information and opinion which deserves an airing. However, if the viewer and listener is prepared to meet the BBC half-way – to do a bit of digging – only the very unreasonable would argue that the BBC is not providing a suitable breadth of views and opinion on the subject of Europe. It is there if you want to find it.

The increasing willingness of some sections of the audience to interact with the BBC and other media should not be taken as in any way absolving producers of the flagship news programmes and bulletins in this respect. It remains the case that large sections of the audience have no inclination to engage in this way, and require the BBC to provide them with impartiality, including appropriate breadth of opinion, as they sit back in their armchairs, as well as when they sit forward with their mouse. The challenge for the BBC to do so will not go away, but meanwhile perhaps a little more could be done to guide viewers and listeners to where they can find more information and opinion – cross-promoting a wider range of BBC services.

## Religion and ethics

If the BBC's coverage of Europe and immigration is likely to give rise to strongly held views among its audiences, then the topic of religion and ethics invites a passion. While both of the former are important issues which affect major aspects of our everyday lives, for many people in Britain and around the world, religion or belief defines who they are. Hence their capacity for zeal and commitment is quite unlike that associated with any other aspects of their lives.

The BBC's coverage of religion and belief is wide ranging and substantial, and falls into distinct categories. The sheer number, regularity and longevity of programmes of worship,

seems in itself to confound those who claim that the BBC essentially has a secular agenda. Other programmes of religious news, debate and analysis are also many and regular, and present a range of opportunities to hear about faiths other than Christianity. And that's not to mention the vast amount of coverage of aspects of religion in news and current affairs.

In the face of those layers and all the complexity, it has proven to be essential to keep the focus of this report confined as far as possible to the relatively narrow question posed – which is whether the BBC reflects an adequate breadth of opinions in its coverage. Our method of addressing this, as with Europe and immigration, has been to identify those who may feel they have a claim that their opinions have been under-represented, and invite them to tell us whether they feel that this is so. This has led us to dialogue with Anglicans, Catholics, Protestant non-conformists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Humanists and Secularists. All have been rewarding and broad-ranging conversations on many aspects of the BBC service, and in the end, the only groups who felt that their views were under-represented were Humanists and Secularists, and Sikhs. Their points were kept in mind throughout our survey of the BBC's Religion and Ethics output.

Let us take first of all the area of acts of worship on the BBC, and I have included Songs of Praise because, although not technically an act of worship, the inclusion, as its core material, of the congregations of churches singing hymns makes it look and feel like one. Though both Songs of Praise on BBC One and Sunday Worship on Radio 4 have been a feature of the schedules quite literally for a lifetime, it always seems slightly surprising when the pattern of family viewing on TV, and news and magazine programmes on radio, are interrupted by a religious service. It feels at the same time to be slightly anachronistic, and yet strangely reassuring. Equally or perhaps even more surprising is the Daily Service on Radio 4 Long Wave which, at 85 years old and counting, claims to be the longest running programme of its kind in the world.

These acts of worship are deeply embedded in the BBC tradition; an extract from the BBC's Public Purposes tells us that: "BBC viewers, listeners and users can rely on the BBC to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK. These communities may be based on geography, on faith, on language, or on a shared interest such as sport. The BBC will stimulate debate within and between the communities of the UK, and encourage people to get involved with their local communities."

Of course, the Humanists and Secularists feel strongly that the provision of what seems to be a lot of Christian worship on the BBC gives undue weight to religion in an increasingly non-religious society. They point to recent census reports which show that the number of people in the UK who describe themselves as having no religion is rising quickly, and that religion is fast becoming less and less relevant to our lives.

Certainly the number of people reporting themselves to be religious seems to be falling. According to the recent census 14.1 million people, around a quarter of the population in England and Wales, reported they had no religion in 2011, up from just under 15 per cent in 2001. There was a decrease, between 2001 and 2011 from 71.7 per cent to 59.3 per cent of people who identify as Christian. There were, however, increases in those declaring themselves believers in religions other than Christianity, with the number of Muslims increasing the most, from 3.0 per cent to 4.8 per cent.

In the face of what does indeed seem to be a dramatic decline in the number of people professing the Christian faith, the sheer volume of programmes of worship on radio and TV may seem difficult to justify. This is a matter for the BBC, and is only of relevance to this report if it seems that the preponderance of programmes featuring religion is squeezing out other voices and therefore narrowing the overall breadth of opinion heard on the BBC.

Trying to weigh the virtues of featuring one type of programming against another is of course more complex than can be expressed merely through the arithmetic. Though the BBC audiences tuning in to acts of worship on the BBC may be relatively small, those who do tune in report high levels of appreciation. The issue therefore raises the question of the balance, when deciding priorities, between what may be an intensely enjoyable experience for a minority audience, against programming which could perhaps produce higher ratings, but may be less fervently appreciated. Not an easy equation. Is a viewer who enjoys a religious programme twice as much as two viewers enjoy a quiz programme to be given equal weight? Especially if that first viewer may be under-served in other ways?

To add a further complication, we should add into the balance the fact that programmes of worship and other aspects of religion can be, and are, appreciated by significant numbers of people who would not describe themselves as regular viewers and listeners. Though not a devoted listener to the Daily Service myself, on the occasions when I do listen, I get more out of doing so than I get from the apparently compulsory worship of football which seems to feature all over radio and television at far less convenient times. I also feel very little resentment of the audiences which enjoy either worship or football more than I do. I am not the target audience for either type of programming, but find that there is usually something else worth listening to somewhere close by on the dial. Or I can read a book. The allocation of resources is, of course, always an issue, but the merest glance at the volume of airtime available to the BBC on all channels and online indicates that there is no genuine argument that the presence of one type of programming is squeezing out the opportunity to hear an alternative point of view.

No denomination of the Christian churches took the opportunity of this review to make the case that they were under-represented in the distribution of services, though the theologian Robert Beckford told us that from his point of view "Worship is not aimed at or structured around the dominance of black Pentecostalism. More black people go to church in central London than any other ethnic group. More black and brown people go to church but these programmes are not talking to these audiences. The output is aimed at the general audience which means you are never going to engage with the black audience....Why", asks Robert, "listen to Songs of Praise when you can listen to a plethora of black Christian stations across the globe?"

It probably does not need saying that the BBC is conscientious about ensuring an appropriate mix across its religious output, and the Religion and Ethics department describes The Sunday Hour on Radio 2 as predominantly a gospel/inspirational show and that the live service for Pentecost has regularly been from an Evangelical congregation. However, Robert's point raises the thorny question of the perspective from which BBC output is viewed, and in this case, whether it is seen through the prism of an urban or a rural background. Anyone watching the generality of BBC worship from the centre of

Bradford or Hackney may well feel that the predominantly white congregations bear little relationship to the communities in which they live. Seen from Carlisle or Salisbury, however, BBC congregations may look far more representative.

Meanwhile, slightly to my surprise, none of the other religions I consulted expressed a wish to have their own services of worship broadcast. This is perhaps in part because it was not felt that broadcasting services would contribute to a better understanding of the religion concerned; however, the absence of any coverage of religious worship by other religions, perhaps should be seen to add weight to the BBC's obligation to cover these religions in other ways. The point provoked a tangential thought from Peter Hitchens: "The BBC does implicitly take a side on whether Britain is a Christian country – that it is *not* a Christian country and should be multicultural. Both Christianity and Islam are statements of opinion with which anyone is entitled to disagree but on Radio 4's 'Sunday' programme, Islam gets a free ride compared to the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, which are endlessly bombarded on that programme with stories about paedophilia, homosexuality and women priests."

I asked for Thought for the Day on Radio 4 to be included in the remit for this review because it seemed absurd to examine the provision of range of voice within religion and ethics, without taking into account what must be one of the most listened-to places where religious range of voice is provided. For my trouble I found myself involved in what has been a lengthy debate between the BBC and the National Secular Society, in which the NSS claims that Thought for the Day should not exist at all, and that if it does, it should include contributions from Humanists and Secularists. This is on the basis that to allocate over three minutes of airtime to a single voice, and to allow it to go unchallenged by interrogation or analysis, gives to religion a status which is not accorded to any other aspect of our lives, and which is unjustified. However, if this argument fails, and Thought for the Day should continue, then Secularists and Humanists wish to be included among its contributors on the basis that theirs are "beliefs" just as other religions are – an argument which has been given weight by the law of the land.

This matter has been debated at length within the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust which has taken the view that it is a matter for BBC Management to decide whether Thought for the Day should include Humanists or secular voices among its contributors. However, it is not simply the BBC which thinks that it has to have belief as part of its output – it is required to do so by the Agreement with the Secretary of State which sets the BBC Trust the requirement to have regard "to the importance of reflecting different religions and other beliefs" as it sets the purpose remits which explain how the BBC should represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities. Personally I see no difficulty in including a Humanist or Secular contribution within Thought for the Day if justified on editorial grounds. David Elstein agrees, but for slightly different reasons. He told us that: "On religion I am an agnostic and have long thought that BBC's commitment to religion can't be right. It is part of the polity and the BBC thinks it has to have belief as part of the output. I am one of those who think TFTD should have regular atheists in it to achieve a full range."

None of the religions whose contributions are currently included in Thought for the Day felt that they were discriminated against by the BBC, in terms of what they are allowed to say, or the relative frequency of their contributions. Cardiff's content analysis

demonstrated that Thought for the Day – which accounted for three in five of all stories about religion on the Today programme during the sample periods in 2007 and 2012 – well represented the diversity of religions within the UK. Whilst Christian denominations accounted for 58% of religions discussed in the programme, Thought for the Day also gave rise to perspectives representing Islam, Sikhism, Judaism and Hinduism.

No other minority religion took the opportunity of this review to make a case for inclusion. I spoke to Lord Indarjit Singh, who has contributed to Thought for the Day since 1984; he felt that perhaps the BBC is seeking to exercise more control over the content of the programme in recent times, usually because of heightened sensitivity about one religion offending another. This point was put directly to Christine Morgan, who is responsible for the content of Thought for the Day; she did not accept that this was so. Lord Singh also felt that perhaps it is time to broaden the pool of contributors. Neither view was echoed elsewhere among other contributors to whom I spoke, although it does seem that out of a population of half a million Sikhs in this country, it ought to be possible to find a spokesman in addition to the excellent Lord Singh.

Beyond the provision of programmes of worship, and looking more widely at the BBC's factual programmes about religion and ethics, the range and depth of programming and voices heard across the BBC services is once again striking and impressive. It includes the Sunday programme, The Moral Maze, Beyond Belief, Thought for the Day, Pause for Thought, Good Morning Sunday and The Sunday Hour, plus a range of documentary series which added up to more than 1,000 hours just on radio last year. Indeed, in its submission to this review, the British Humanist Association states that the quantity of religious output is an issue in itself: "It is decidedly our view that the quantity of sympathetic coverage of religion affects the impartiality of the BBC's output."

The Religion and Ethics department is also responsible for producing and commissioning regular television programmes totalling some 180 hours a year. In addition to Songs of Praise which has been running for over 50 years and is the longest running religious TV programme in the world, there is Sunday Morning Live, which is a live, topical, interactive discussion programme; The Big Questions is now in its sixth series (hosted by Nicky Campbell), which is a moral, ethical and religious debate programme. A glance at the website associated with the series indicates the inclusion of what seems to be the widest range of subjects and voices imaginable. The programme cleverly mixes discussions of religious topics with others of more general interest, thereby reducing any perceived distinction between them.

The Religion and Ethics department has also produced and commissioned a large number of documentary series and programmes including A Very British Wedding on BBC Two in March this year, a four part series which follows the weddings of multicultural couples in contemporary Britain, including Hindu, Jewish and Sikh.

Other recent examples of output which notably broadened the range of voices heard on the BBC include Chaplains: Angels of Mersey on BBC Two, a series of six programmes which followed chaplains in the city of Liverpool, looking at the work they do and the people whose lives they touch. There was Amish: A Secret Life also on BBC Two which painted a portrait of Amish family life and faith, while The Story of the Turban on

BBC One – not surprisingly – traced the history of the turban. Great British Islam on BBC One told the little-known story of three English gentlemen who embraced Islam at a time when to be a Muslim was to be seen to be a traitor to your country; and Rosh Hashanah: Science v Religion on BBC One in September last year saw the Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks trying to convince three non-believing scientists that science and religion, frequently set up as polar opposites, need not be at war.

If anyone has any doubt of the BBC's commitment to religion and ethics in general, and to diversity in particular, they can do no better than to spend some time with Christine Morgan who runs the BBC's radio output from Salford. An hour will not be anything like enough. Christine is evangelical in the most engaging sense about the BBC's output, and will detain you for as long as you like about the efforts she and her team go to in order to accommodate all legitimate voices. She argues persuasively against the contention that the sheer volume of programmes from her department is disproportionate to the number of people describing themselves as religious. More and more young people are interested in religion whether or not they are religious – because they know it is arguable that they cannot understand the modern world unless they understand religion. Thought for the Day, she says, is one of the rather few areas where people who do not have extreme views are allowed to express their opinions; a place, indeed, for a wide range of nuanced and thought-provoking ideas. She would regard the introduction of Atheists as altering the fundamental basis of the slot, which is to be religious, into something entirely different. It would culminate in the dilution and eventual demise of a unique and valuable part of the BBC service.

In addition to the list above, Christine's team is responsible for series such as Radio 2's six episodes of The Great British Faith (2010 & 2012), in which Hardeep Singh Kohli looked at how faith has shaped cities in the UK. It was, says Christine, "Reflecting the history of the country back to itself". The producers created an interactive Faith Map of Britain and, working with Local Radio producers, they had 49 religions dotted around the map within 6 weeks of starting. Christine describes the task as, "Quite a layered thing – we are trying to serve the Christian audience, which is very vocal, and within that trying to cover all denominations, whilst being very aware of new communities and the world's major faith traditions plus the whole spread of how people define themselves – spiritual, humanist, atheist."

Christine accepts that there is "a tension all the time in trying to meet the needs of a core, informed audience for whom faith is important and saying to them, 'this is an intelligent way of presenting religious issues for you to engage with'. In terms of the mainstream news agenda – it is our job to add value for people who are not necessarily interested in religion or belief but are interested to hear what we have to say. Things you would not hear anywhere else. There is a real tendency to underestimate how much people engage. On current affairs, journalism, conversations, in all the factual stuff, it is about people and their stories, communities."

However, The Moral Maze, which is also part of the output of Christine and her team, could perhaps aspire to greater diversity of voice. Always rigorous and stimulating, the programme takes a topic from the news agenda which raises moral and ethical questions, and invites witnesses to be cross-examined by a panel. The panel involves a number of regular members, including Michael Portillo, Kenan Malik, Melanie Phillips, Giles Fraser and

Claire Fox. Perhaps membership of the panel could be broadened from time to time to enable us to get more perspectives on moral and ethical questions from less well-understood religions.

If there is a criticism of the BBC's coverage of religion and ethics, it may be that while the BBC does reflect aspects of minority religions, it appears to some to do so through the prism of Christianity. The audience research suggested that there was thought to be too great an emphasis on the BBC on Christianity. The Radio 4 Sunday morning series entitled "Sunday", for example, seems to some of those with whom I spoke to be essentially about the Anglican and Catholic churches, while occasionally looking at aspects of other religions. This charge does not seem to be borne out by the arithmetic of the running orders, but the fact that it is part of an impression for some people merits further consideration.

A metaphor for this line of argument about the BBC's approach to minority religions can be seen in the excellent short series featured on BBC Two last year about Westminster Abbey. The series followed a year in the life of the Abbey, especially the work of the young choristers and their trip to Rome to perform in the Vatican. The first reference to other religions came at around 38 minutes into episode one, where mention was made of an interfaith event, and we were shown pictures of a lot of people from different religions, and the question arose about whether there would be "special dietary requirements". At one stage there was a visit to the Abbey by the Dalai Lama, which was treated with an awe and curiosity that would have been more appropriate for a visit by Obi-Wan Kenobi. The Dalai Lama spoke a very few barely comprehensible sentences, headed off, and was declared to be "an extraordinary man".

This is not to argue that it is the job of a series such as Westminster Abbey to explain more about the people with different religions or specifically about Tibetan Buddhism; this was an observational documentary series, and anyway not every programme can do everything. However, it is worthwhile to try to put ourselves in the minds of adherents of minority religions watching such a series. In both examples, they appeared to be being treated by the Abbey as slight curiosities, and some seem to feel this way about how they are treated by the BBC; as slightly exotic and slightly mysterious creatures.

It is not only the minority religions in the UK who feel that sometimes the BBC treats them as if they are rarified and slightly deranged outsiders to mainstream thinking. It's a theme reflected by Roger Bolton who claims that, for example, if a Christian is interviewed by the BBC about their objections to abortion on religious grounds, they are treated as though they are just a bit barmy. This point of view was endorsed by the very religious in the sample questioned in the audience research – both Muslims and Evangelicals. Their view is that the BBC is not just neutral but actively non-religious or secular in its attitude. A truly impartial interviewer, in their view, should be able to entertain the possibility that a religious viewpoint is both valid and true. They also felt that the BBC should not take the part of the secular by condemning, mocking or failing to understand religious arguments, and it should not tolerate this point of view in studio audiences either; it should undertake to explain the basic view, and treat religious views with respect, and occasionally with more patience. Less committed religious people and agnostics said that they do not on the whole detect this bias and most feel that people "get their say".

As so often in these discussions, it is not easy to identify specific examples, but Roger's argument prompted a feeling of recognition among others from the religious community to whom I spoke. It is another area where BBC journalists need constantly to examine their own assumptions about "shared consensus" before embarking on interviews involving deeply held beliefs.

We turn now to the coverage of religion in BBC news and current affairs, and it is arguable that events since 9/11 have meant that aspects of religion feature in the running-order of news programmes as never before. However, it should be kept in mind that by no means all of this attention in the news is welcomed by the communities at the centre of them. The spectre of terrorism has given a slant and profile to perceptions of Islam which is a cause of concern and dismay for the vast majority of Muslims. This, for example, is reflected in Cardiff's content analysis. Stories on the relationship between Islam and terrorism or extremism accounted for a full 23.1% of all reports on Islam, with an additional 11.5% of stories about Islam dealing with issues of fundamentalism and extremism. So too the scandals over paedophilia in the Catholic Church have thrown it into the headlines in a way which is regretted by almost every Catholic. Meanwhile, though a long way down the scale of gravity, but still unwelcome, news coverage of the Anglican Church has been dominated by debates about women bishops and gay clergy, almost to the exclusion of other matters of far more importance within the Church itself.

Evangelical Christians and Muslims questioned in the audience research said that they felt that while their voice is nominally heard on the BBC, their position on a range of issues is not always understood or fully outlined – i.e. their core theological arguments are not properly depicted in flagship media. For example, they want to hear in the flagship programmes simple views such as that gay marriage is forbidden in scripture, or why they are opposed to women bishops – these fundamental positions and explanations are also felt to be lacking by the wider public.

The point was made to us once again by Roger Bolton, who believes that BBC journalists tend to see the debates over gay marriage and women priests in the context of equal rights, while from the religious perspective they are matters of scripture and theology. Roger and others to whom I spoke felt that conservatives on these subjects tend to be treated by interviewers as throwbacks who are damaging the Church and dragging it back into the past, rather than people who simply have a different view about the tenets of their faith.

A criticism raised in the audience research, about the coverage of news topics such as gay marriage and women bishops, was precisely the tension between the need to explain the basics of the religious position and world view to the "lay" viewer who might know nothing about why the Church "didn't want" women bishops, and the requirement to broadcast simultaneously to (and from within) a more engaged, but very small internal church audience who understood a very recondite set of arguments. This places a responsibility on the broadcaster to tempt the contributors away from the "angels on pinheads" arguments of a small group of initiates towards stating a very obvious and basic position more clearly. This applied particularly if the interviewees are media trained.

Those who described themselves as "more religious" also wanted less indirect reporting of their positions on the BBC, and more exposition of their basic theological stance preferably direct from Christians. "Whether you are challenging me or my religion that is

fine, but you have to hear us as well," said an "Evangelical" from London. Muslims who were questioned desperately wanted others to understand better what The Prophet means to them.

The BBC does need to take particular care when it prefers to report the different views within the churches, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. The Corporation seems to some to be self-evidently sympathetic to the idea of gay marriage and positively in favour of women priests. Some listeners to the Today programme on 12 December last year would have been disappointed to hear the BBC reporter exclaim that "the decision to reject the idea of women bishops is an embarrassing setback for the Church of England," when their own belief is that the postponement of a decision was a way of keeping the Church unified. Most members of most religious communities of course recognise that it is in the nature of news to highlight what is out of the ordinary; we seldom feature the police on our news programmes when they are doing their job properly. However, we have already pointed to the particular sensitivity which accompanies matters of religion above all other subjects, and so their treatment in the news requires particular care.

These are areas where the arguments for and against can be subtle and nuanced, and for which the "Punch and Judy" adversarial approach can be wholly unsuitable. It is part of the ongoing challenge facing the BBC to ensure that they are conducted with intelligence and decorum, and that all sides of the debate need to have an appropriate airing.

BBC editorial staff at all levels struggle between the need to try to treat all religions and beliefs fairly and equally, while taking into account what may be the greater sensitivity of some believers versus others. Christians frequently complain that while broadcasters and journalists tip-toe around the sensitivities of Muslims, it seems perfectly all right to the BBC to run a programme in Holy Week entitled *Are You Having a Laugh? Comedy and Christianity*, and promote it in the press release by asking "Is Christianity a Joke?" Admittedly the programme was presented by the indubitably Christian Ann Widdecombe but would a programme entitled *Is Islam a Joke?* find its way onto the schedules? In a perfect world it would, of course, be desirable for everyone to respect the legitimate sensitivities of others, and for all the religious to feel that they are not challenged by an idiotic cartoon or empty-headed video. However, we do not live in a perfect world, and therefore have to do the best we can to exercise "due impartiality".

Spokespeople for the religious communities took the opportunity of this review to make some other related points which merit inclusion. Arun Arora, Director of Communications for the Church of England, thought BBC News was too focused on stories about conflict inside the Church. The Bishop of Worcester worried that, "By seeking to be impartial, the BBC can give the strident view more of a role than it should have." Farooq Murad of the Muslim Council of Britain thought that programmes "do not reflect Muslim community in terms of their contribution" but he welcomed some recent specialist factual programmes on BBC Four: "There have definitely been a lot of positives. Waldemar Januszczak's programme, *The Wonder of Islam*, went round the community on Twitter. And there was Rageh's programme on *Hidden Art of Islam* in March 2012." [Rageh Omaar]

Though perhaps only tangentially related to our central theme of breadth of opinion, it would be remiss not to refer to the complaint made most frequently by representatives of all the religions. This is about what was widely regarded as a disappointingly low level of

basic knowledge about their faiths among journalists who contact them from the BBC. The complaint rarely applied, it should be said, to members of the specialist teams who work on regular programme strands in Religion and Ethics, but especially related to generalists working for news and current affairs programmes. I was given several surprising examples. There is no excuse for this; it seems reasonable that any journalist employed by the BBC should be expected to have a basic knowledge of the main and larger minority religions, their beliefs and hierarchies. If they do not, the BBC's College of Journalism website (which is open and available to all) carries an excellent series of expositions by Mark Tully, Nicholas Witchell and Ed Stourton which are strongly to be recommended.

It should be said, finally in this section, that a number of the concerns raised by members of the religious communities who would also regard themselves as friends and admirers of the BBC, revolved around the fact that there seemed to them to be no individual in the Corporation with authority to take an overview of all coverage of religion and ethics. For a subject area in which it is necessary, over time and different outlets, to maintain appropriate proportion in the prominence given to different religions, it seems counter-intuitive that there appears to be no central point in the BBC entrusted with this responsibility. So that for example, the individual channel controllers are empowered to commission programmes which may touch on aspects of religious belief, without any reference to the Head of Religion & Ethics, whose role is specifically to commission and oversee programmes in this area. Aaqil Ahmed reports that he is the natural first port of call for members of the religious community who have observations about religious programmes on the BBC, but sometimes has to respond with (his no doubt more tactful version of...) "it's nothing to do with me". This seems frustrating for all concerned but, more seriously, does not seem to be a good way of ensuring that the sensitivities arising in this area, and from the need for proportionate coverage, are dealt with effectively. It is not for this report, or indeed for the Trust, to tell BBC Management how to structure internal departments, but perhaps this would be an appropriate occasion to invite them to consider the problem and to propose a solution.

## Section two: Parameters of future debate

It seems unlikely that anyone in the BBC needs to be persuaded of either the importance of impartiality or of the need to achieve it through including an appropriate breadth of opinion. Impartiality runs through the BBC veins like Blackpool through a stick of rock, and no-one doubts that impartiality is only achieved by listening and giving voice to "all sides of the story". However, equally it seems undeniable that many friends and critics of the BBC take the view that its editorial team includes a higher proportion than does the general population of what might be described as "liberal progressives"; to express it in less technical terms, they are tolerant, or "live and let live" kind of people. Like almost all generalisations, this one is of course only part of the total picture, but try asking yourself how many times you will hear voices on the BBC prosecuting the following arguments. And if and when you do hear them, how robustly do you think they will be challenged? Former BBC Political Correspondent and Chief Executive of the Index on Censorship, John

Kampfner, told us, "I struggle to think of a single point of view that is unacceptable for the BBC but I can think of lots of points of view that are under-represented."

Perhaps a list of views which we might hear from time to time, but which might be challenged more vehemently than others, would look something like this:

1. Competition is a good thing and therefore far more privatised services should be allowed within the NHS.
2. People should be encouraged to opt for private medicine because they contribute to the NHS through taxation but ease the burden on it by not using it.
3. Britain was a better place to live when the trade unions were stronger and more able to represent the interests of working people.
4. Private education is a good thing because it encourages competition and eases the burden on the state sector.
5. A smaller state is a good thing and government savings are a good thing rather than bad.
6. Businesses are responsible to their shareholders, not to wider society and should pay only the tax they are required to pay by law.
7. Electricity, gas and water are essential services which should be compulsorily taken back into government ownership.
8. George W Bush was an excellent President/Romney would have made a great President.
9. Women's right to choose is important, but less important than an unborn child's right to life.
10. Opponents of gun control in the US are not necessarily "gun nuts".

Inevitably of course, the BBC Executive is able to point to occasions when these views have been expressed – as indeed one should expect. Whether or not you agree with the detail, however, many friends and admirers of the BBC, as well as critics, may feel they recognise the pattern. Richard Klein, former Controller of the digital TV channel BBC Four, said to us: "For me, what is the range of voices we have at the BBC? Quite limited? Where are the white working class? Where is the common voice?"

So if it has any element of truth whatever, how does a group of people most of whom share a common ethos, guard against allowing that ethos to creep into their journalism? There are essentially two elements to the solution.

The first is for BBC journalists to make it a regular and systematic part of their daily pattern of work to ask themselves whether they are including the widest possible range of voices and views in the agenda of reporting.

The second is, again regularly and systematically, to challenge their own assumptions about the shared consensus within which these debates should be conducted. Is it really OK to assume that George Bush was a disastrous President? When a person appears to

be behaving in a way we regard as wrong-headed, what is making them see the world so differently from the way we see it?

The first of these – the act of going out to find voices outside of the “usual suspects” or the contacts book – is difficult to do, and is made more difficult by the developing environment. Whereas the “old technology” of daily journalism involved a pencil and notebook, a telephone, and lots of standing in pubs or knocking on doors, today so much of it seems to involve sitting in front of a computer screen. Glance over the balcony into the newsroom area of New Broadcasting House, and it is difficult not to be impressed by the state-of-the-art technology which allows journalists to call on research and resources from all over the world, to bring them together, to edit them at their desks, and to put them on the air. What you don't see is journalists going out and meeting people, journalists attending their local council meeting, or attending their local chamber of commerce, or going into the working men's club where ordinary people are socialising and sharing their everyday concerns. You don't see journalists knocking on doors and meeting real people with real lives and real concerns of a kind which may seldom be confronted in London W1. The BBC's former Chief Political Adviser, now chair of the Church Buildings Council, Anne Sloman, told us: “I do worry that so much research is done on the internet now, staff never leave their desks and are regurgitating the same things, often unchecked and unverified.”

This is not to say that these activities do not happen; of course they do. In lots of areas of the BBC, perhaps most notably sports, religion and local radio and TV, interaction with the community remains an essential part of the job. The BBC is in daily touch with its audience in all sorts of ways – in person, on phone-ins, online. The programmes *Any Questions?* on Radio 4 and *BBC One's Question Time* travel around the country each week, offering producers, presenters and those who tune in direct contact with audience views. As the Editor of *Question Time*, Nicolai Gentchev, told us: “The audience can have a very different perspective from the panel. On arming the police, everyone on the panel was against it but the view in the audience was different. It was the same when we did the death penalty.”

But some of the trends are going in the other direction. For example, while the concentration of BBC journalists in New Broadcasting House in London's West End has all kinds of merits, there are dangers associated with it too. A large group of people working together are in danger of becoming more homogenous in their thinking, not less, and so less able to see when the output reflects a narrow outlook.

As some aspects of journalism become more and more desk-bound, the imperative to find ways to “get out more”, mentally and physically, increases. The rapid development of audience feedback through online and Twitter may in some ways be helpful, but is only part of the story. Stephen Mawhinney told us that much of 5 Live's audience interaction came, “from a constant stream of texts and increasingly Tweets”. But there is a terrible danger of mistaking the “Twitterati” for the general public, instead of the still relatively small and self-selecting group that they are. As the Controller of English Regions, David Holdsworth, told us, “For my audience Twitter is over-blown”. He gave us an example of a recent gathering of 50-70 year olds at Sheffield football ground. When asked about their use of social media, only two said they used Twitter, though half had used Facebook. Even the head of the BBC's User Generated Content hub, Chris Hamilton, reminded us that just

over seven million people in the UK have never used the internet. (ONS figures for Q4 2012).

Bringing together journalists from the BBC World Service with those providing the domestic services in New Broadcasting House, could and should be beneficial; casual conversation around the coffee machine can broaden horizons in all directions. However, such is the danger of increasing homogeneity among BBC journalists, that it may be important for the BBC to make a determined effort to bring in and share different opinions and outlooks. The presenter of Radio 4's Feedback programme, Roger Bolton, told us that, in an ideal world, the influx of Bush House journalists into Broadcasting House would bring another perspective, but he feared that, "Concentration of all news in W1 is multiplying in spades the danger of the BBC agenda being set in a single newsroom." The danger for journalists who aspire to impartiality, of surrounding themselves with like-minded people with similar views, can scarcely be over-stated.

The move of some BBC departments to Salford could and should be a help in this regard. Perhaps it was no coincidence that two of my most refreshing meetings were with Christine Morgan and Stephen Mawhinney both of whom are based there. Both seemed genuinely stimulated by the opportunity provided by the north-west to get away from the London-centric mind-set; and perhaps the closer relationship to the real audience which is achieved through phone-ins to 5 Live is part of the formula. We have been told of instances where feedback from the "real world" via BBC outposts in the nations and regions have had the effect of broadening the approach to stories or issues, and no doubt all sides will benefit as the BBC becomes even more entrenched in the north-west community.

The BBC nations and regions, of course, have their perspective and part to play in grounding the BBC footprint squarely over the UK, and making it less London-centric. Atholl Duncan, formerly head of BBC News and Current Affairs Scotland, told us that where he comes from they see the debate over the EU as London worrying about having decisions which crucially affect us being made in a Parliament elsewhere. "Welcome to our world!" he says – instantly imparting to the rest of the UK a whole new way of looking at the story through eyes from north of the border.

There is more that the BBC can do in many areas to ensure that it widens its net of contributors and opinions. A simple example is Question Time. When seeking to gather the audiences for upcoming shows, the announcement of future locations is made on the programme, and those interested are required to go online and complete a questionnaire. The team is extremely conscientious about achieving balance – remarkably, every one of the 200+ members of the audience is spoken to on the telephone. By definition, however, this method of gathering the audience fishes in the pond already populated by viewers of the programme. It is therefore less likely that Question Time audiences will include people who are not already engaged in politics or public affairs. They are already viewers of BBC current affairs; perhaps we are unlikely to hear views from people who are not "a bit like us". It is, of course, to be warmly welcomed that a series such as Question Time is out and about in the community week in, week out, but there must be many ways in which the programme could reach parts of the community not already reached by the BBC.

There are some other positive actions available to the BBC which have been used from time to time on a more or less ad hoc basis, but which perhaps could be regularised. An example would be the routine appointment of a "story champion" to take front-line responsibility for keeping watch on big stories which are likely to be long-running but which don't necessarily fall under the direct purview of an Editor. This might be especially relevant where a family has been involved in a tragedy of some kind and scores of journalists are knocking on their door – several of them, perhaps, from the BBC. Part of the job would be to act as a liaison point for any BBC programmes wishing to cover the story, and another part would be to stand back from time to time from the run of daily news and ask which relevant voices or perspectives have not been heard. The appointment of a "story champion" need not involve formal promotion or hierarchy, and would last only for the duration of the story, but might at least establish a structure which would help to ensure that breadth of voice was kept on the radar.

Adjacent to that would be to regularise what are already called "stand back moments" when journalists covering a fast-unfolding story take scheduled time out to pause and consider aspects or voices which may not have been taken into account. Here is an area where input from the phone-ins can be helpful, because sometimes the public can reach a view on a story which might not occur immediately to journalists: such as when the killing of two policewomen in Manchester led quickly to a debate about reintroducing the death penalty, or when the paparazzi photos of a topless Kate Middleton were being reported as an issue about press-intrusion, only for the public to suggest that it was in part about why she didn't keep her bikini-top on! The discipline of constantly asking some variation of "how will this play on a housing-estate in Merthyr or Aberdeen?" is frequently helpful in getting a perspective on a story.

The second solution suggested above – the need for BBC journalists regularly and systematically to challenge the assumptions behind their own approach to a story, is equally difficult to achieve. Even when good intentions lead to specific measures aimed at doing so, there can be inadvertent aberrations. Take, for example, the BBC College of Journalism online service, which includes a whole section on impartiality. First among the clips illustrating the need for impartiality in covering the subject of climate change is an illustrated lecture given by the BBC's former Environment Correspondent Richard Black. The section of the lecture on the site is entirely devoted to sustaining the case that climate change is effectively "settled science" and that those who argue otherwise are simply wrong. What might have been helpful is for Richard's talk about the scientific position, and David Shukman's on the same site, to have included a line or two in which he reminded his audience of John Bridcut's point, a point made also in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines, that dissenters (or even sceptics) should still occasionally be heard because it is not the BBC's role to close down this debate.

The point is that "people like us" work from an assumed consensus, which can have the effect of narrowing debate, and prevent us from gaining a real understanding of points of view we do not share. John Kampfner explained it thus: "So much of the public conversation emanates from London so that leads to a more tolerant, liberal approach to life. If you don't subscribe to that and you live in Gloucestershire, you may feel your views are not being represented. It pertains to all aspects of public life, not just the BBC."

What this amounts to, is a plea to open our minds, and to be willing to open our eyes and ears to a wider range of views than that which our first instincts may tell us to include. For all the agonising we witnessed over the question of whether to allow BNP leader Nick Griffin to appear on Question Time, in the end he appeared, gave a performance which many found unconvincing, and has more or less vanished without trace. The world did not stop spinning on its axis, and it turns out that very few views are so powerful and persuasive that we cannot trust the public to hear them; and if they are, then perhaps that merely shows that they deserve to have been given a hearing.

There is a third, final and most important stage which needs to be achieved if the BBC is genuinely to deliver to society the benefits which are outlined in the opening of this report. Stage one is to seek out and give a platform to a range of views, some of which we do not instinctively agree with. Stage two is to question our own assumptions about "a shared consensus". Stage three is that it is not enough to *hear* what others have to say, we also have to *listen*. What's the difference? Hearing (for the purposes of this argument) is the thing that takes place in the ear, and listening is the thing that takes place in the brain.

The insomnia referred to in my first sentence means that I usually retire to bed before Newsnight, but when I see it, I almost always enjoy it. Meanwhile I feel as though I have been addicted to the Today programme for my whole life. However, sometimes I feel that tuning in to either can be like witnessing what seems to be a big and healthy looking bloke getting into the ring with the fairground prize-fighter. One is perfectly fit and looks as though he could take care of himself, but the other does it for a living; one has been schooled in the Queensbury rules, and the other is a pugilist. The result can be excruciatingly entertaining to witness, and no-one doubts that both sides need properly to be tested, but it is not always a fair display of the merits of each fighter.

While no doubt most interviewees are ready, able and willing to try to put across their point of view, it must seem to many that the contest is played on anything but a level playing field. They are required to turn up at the crack of dawn or late at night, in an environment which is at best unfamiliar, to be braced and ready for any approach to the questioning, live on air with no second chances. At risk of mixing my sporting metaphors, it's a bit like being a Premiership team but having to play every game against Manchester United, and where every match is played away at Old Trafford.

When George Galloway squared up to Jeremy Paxman after Galloway won the Bradford West by-election, Paxman started raining blows on him from the starting bell, to an extent that I was surprised to find my sympathies going towards the challenger. I even found myself wondering whether, if Galloway was given space, he might say something I agreed with. Eventually Paxman did give him space, and I did. Then I watched the clip on YouTube in which Galloway, upon discovering that his opponent was an Israeli, walked out of a university debate at Oxford. Galloway does not debate with Israelis; is not even willing to hear what they have to say. All my sympathy instantly evaporated. The man struggling to be heard on Newsnight blocks his own ears against a point of view he does not like.

"Never judge a person's behaviour without an intimate understanding of their circumstances." If someone is saying something that sounds entirely unreasonable, make

a real effort to put yourself in their place and see the world from their point of view. Almost always it will illuminate the problem, even if the result of listening is a complete rejection of the speaker's point of view. If the BBC can provide the illumination, then this alone will have justified the licence fee.

However, to make the decision to broaden significantly the range of voices we hear on the BBC – to include people whose views we initially find offensive – requires courage and determination. Giving platforms to views our instincts may tell us are unpalatable is likely to give rise to unwelcome headlines in some sections of the popular press, and the BBC would need to feel robust in its justification for doing so. This in turn requires a culture of support for self-belief and for risk-taking, which is a challenge for the BBC which goes to the very top.

## Conclusion

The findings of this review can be summarised as follows:

On the basis of the content analysis, and anecdotal and other evidence gathered in this review, there seems to be little reason to suppose that the "breadth of view" reflected in BBC output improved as a result of the "Seesaw to Wagon Wheel" report. The BBC reflected an impressive range of opinions before it, and continues to reflect an impressive range of opinion following it.

The relative dominance of Westminster as a driver for the BBC's daily news agenda can have a tendency to distort editorial attention from what may be the concerns of the wider community. This tendency has been identified in previous reviews on impartiality, and has emerged as a theme underlying several issues throughout this review.

The BBC was slow to reflect the weight of concern in the wider community about issues arising from immigration. It remains the case that the agenda of debate is probably too driven by the views of politicians. However, overall the breadth of opinion reflected by the BBC on this subject is broad and impressive, and no persuasive evidence was found that significant areas of opinion are not given due weight today.

The BBC was slow to give appropriate prominence to the growing weight of opinion opposing UK membership of the EU, but in more recent times has achieved a better balance. The very complexity of issues and arguments related to the EU means that limits of time and space have inhibited the BBC's ability to give profile to a full range of opinions. However, those prepared to look for them can find a wide and comprehensive range of information and viewpoints in various BBC on-air and online services.

The BBC's services of worship, news and analysis produced by its Religion and Ethics team is comprehensive and impressive. I found no convincing evidence that voices which could and should have been heard, had not been heard, and no convincing evidence that the BBC had not reflected an appropriate balance between different religions.

Many senior people in the BBC are aware of the concern that it draws a higher than average proportion of its key decision makers from a relatively narrow band of social backgrounds and perspectives. The BBC insists that, whether or not this is so, its

journalism is not affected. Certainly it need not be a problem, but it does demand continuous vigilance in ensuring that views which may not be palatable to journalists are given an appropriate airing, and a constant challenging of assumptions underlying the approach taken to stories.

## Recommendations

BBC journalists and producers should take every opportunity to remind themselves of the need to include a wide range of views and opinions in their coverage. This might be done through:

- The appointment of “story champions” for major running stories who are tasked to keep under review the range of voices being heard, and especially to consider which relevant opinions may be missing from coverage.
- The more systematic use of “stand back moments” in which editorial teams take time out to review and take stock of coverage of big and running stories, and also to examine their assumptions on the “accepted consensus”.
- Use of regular reminders, including regularly updated variations of – “have we included a sufficiently wide range of opinions?”
- There should be a renewed determination to seek out opinions which “people like us” may find unpalatable, and to examine and challenge them with a view to better understanding of other viewpoints, rather than winning a debate on points.
- Positive efforts should be made for journalists to “get out more”, physically and mentally – which may mean introducing a regular and comprehensive programme of inviting outsiders from different walks of life to explain their lives and priorities. Ever-pressing deadlines can make these sessions feel low-priority and too tempting to “skip”, and so a more systematic approach could be considered – perhaps allocating ten minutes at the end of editorial meetings of different programmes throughout the day.
- Finding and broadcasting new voices could become a routine part of the job in relevant roles within the BBC, and annual performance reviews could monitor and reward individuals for improving breadth of opinion in this way.
- While it may be inevitable that the daily news agenda will often be dominated by the activities and agenda of politicians, the BBC should make concerted efforts to monitor currents of opinion among the wider community, in order that it might respond more speedily to popular concerns such as immigration and Europe.
- Religion and ethics raise complex issues of great sensitivity to large sections of the audience, and require constant attention to the coverage devoted to particular beliefs and issues within those beliefs. The BBC Management is invited to consider the problem and propose a solution.

- Positive efforts could be made when recruiting audiences for programmes such as Question Time to reach members of the public who are not already among BBC viewers or listeners.
- The audience submits extensive solicited comment to the BBC via phone-ins, and online, which should form a helpful (though not comprehensive) index of their preoccupations, and missing opinions or arguments they want to see represented. Consideration should be given to methods of taking account of the breadth of opinion expressed through these means and feeding it back more proactively into editorial thinking.
- Although the BBC's output undoubtedly contains a huge range of information and opinion, the audience will sometimes not know where to find it. More efforts could be made to link exposure of complex and controversial issues in popular news and current affairs back to related BBC output.

# BBC EXECUTIVE RESPONSE TO STUART PREBBLE'S REPORT

We are grateful for the supportive manner in which Stuart Prebble has expressed his opinions of our coverage. Journalism is not a precise science and the author has noted a "difficulty in obtaining objective statistical data" to inform his report. His own views are, however, clear and we are pleased that he has concluded, overall, that our coverage of immigration is "broad and impressive", that on the EU we offer "a wide and comprehensive range of information and viewpoints" and that the BBC's coverage of religion is "comprehensive and impressive".

We also accept the author's exhortation to do better. The BBC should always strive to extend and improve the spread of its coverage, rather than reach a stasis in its thinking. We have reservations, however, about some aspects of the report.

While taking note of some of the audience research about the public's perceptions, this should not, of course, necessarily mean we should seek to diminish the place of elected politicians in our output. But we agree with the author's broader point – that if politicians do not reflect the public mood, then by extension the BBC may have failed to capture it. So we accept his suggestion that the BBC should make concerted efforts to monitor currents of opinion among the wider community. We will ensure that the views gathered by our audience response team are more widely and systematically disseminated. We also accept the author's conclusion that we must "guide viewers and listeners to where they can find more information and opinion – cross-promoting a wider range of BBC services".

Our journalists "leave their personal politics at home when they go to work" – to adapt the phrase Mr Prebble uses to describe his own actions when conducting his review. This is fundamental to an understanding of the BBC, so we are pleased that the author has concluded that "impartiality runs through the BBC veins like Blackpool through a stick of rock". But, equally, we agree with the author that we should guard against "group think" by asking ourselves whether we are including the widest possible range of voices and views, and by challenging our own assumptions about the shared consensus within which these debates should be conducted.

Similarly, we accept the author's conclusion that we should regularise "stand back moments" on a fast-unfolding story. This already happens at the BBC News group board, and in daily and weekly news meetings – but it would be sensible to ensure that it is an explicit part of the agenda. We also agree that a "story champion" could aid the coverage of a big news event and that this should be an ad hoc arrangement for the duration of a story. BBC News is currently reviewing its use of its multi-media editor in co-ordinating coverage across its daily output and the conclusions of this separate exercise may offer an appropriate solution.

Stuart Prebble's recognition that the BBC's coverage of religion was "wide ranging and substantial" and presented a range of opportunities to hear about faiths other than

Christianity was welcome. And we are reassured following his dialogue with religious groups that the majority felt represented.

With reference to the 2011 Census we are aware that the religious profile of the UK has changed significantly. In England and Wales there has been a shift in the number of people reporting that they are religious compared to a decade ago and a rise in the number claiming no religion. There were also rises in the proportion of the population who are Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. Against this backdrop, the BBC is undertaking research to appraise the current mix and flavour of its specific Religion and Ethics content across Television and Radio – to assess whether it adequately reflects the reality of religious life in the nation. The research project encompasses both a qualitative and quantitative phase – concentrating predominantly on the five main faith groups.

The research will focus on deriving insight under four main themes: the role of religion on television and radio for audiences; how “well served” audiences currently feel by religious output on the BBC; engagement and enjoyment of BBC religious programming; and how the BBC's religion offer might evolve in the future.

This insight will inform an analysis of the BBC's explicit religious output and how it might better serve audiences. It will provide evidence to fuel decision-making around approach and mix for the BBC's religious output. But we do not propose to revisit the issue of atheists or humanists taking part in Thought for the Day.

We have reservations on the idea of a central point of overview and control on all programmes that have a religious or ethical dimension. We believe that multiple points of entry and devolved responsibility in the hands of a diverse group of programme editors are precisely the way to ensure diversity and range of voice. Doing the opposite could lead to reduction in breadth and reduce diversity, and we would advise strongly against mixing corporate roles with editorial ones. It is incumbent on all commissioners (including channel controllers) to consider issues of impartiality in all relevant output – and seek specialist advice from many sources including the Religion and Ethics Department or Editorial Policy depending on the context.

However, we do recognise that monitoring areas where it is felt there should be a broader range of views over, say, a three or six month period would be beneficial and we will look at this in the context of the broader piece of research outlined above. The Executive will also set up a Religion & Ethics Forum to meet at least twice a year to consider big themes in this area across television, radio and online.