

BBC Trust Review of Breadth of Opinion: follow up

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Background

The BBC is unique among UK broadcasters in its commitment to impartiality across its output. This commitment is at the heart of the BBC's relationship with its audiences. In 2012 the BBC Trust commissioned the former Chief Executive of ITV, Stuart Prebble, to write an independent report on Breadth of Opinion in BBC output, including audience research and content analysis.

The review focused on three key areas; the UK's relationship with the EU, immigration, and religion and ethics. One of the challenges was to undertake rigorous analysis on something as nebulous as opinions.

This impartiality review on Breadth of Opinion¹ was published in July 2013 and the Trust welcomed the report's findings that the range of opinion on BBC output is remarkable and impressive. However, the author advised that it demands "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".

In response, the BBC outlined plans which included: establishing a pan-BBC forum on religion and ethics, appointing story champions for important and long-running stories, and expanding its use of cross-trailing between programmes and BBC online.

The Trust asked the Executive to report back in a year on progress in addressing the issues identified. That report has now been received and is published alongside this commentary.

¹ Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/breadth_opinion.html

Trust Commentary

The BBC's responsibility to reflect a wide range of views on important issues is vital to its journalistic mission and to wider democratic debate. It is one of the ways the BBC fulfils its obligation to be duly impartial and to ensure that its programmes and other content are trusted and valued by licence fee payers. The BBC goes further than any other UK broadcaster in its commitment to impartiality across its output. As such, in 2012 the BBC Trust commissioned an Impartiality Review on Breadth of Opinion. This took the form of an independent report by the former Chief Executive of ITV, Stuart Prebble. The report focused on coverage of immigration, the European Union, and religion and ethics, supported by audience research and content analysis. It was published by the Trust in 2013, together with a response from the BBC's Executive.

Over the past year both immigration and the EU have been centre stage in UK political debate, and the place of faith and of religions in British society has been at the heart of questions about diversity, tolerance, social cohesion, and national security. The BBC Trust wanted to ensure that the BBC has continued to search for ways of giving expression to a wide range of views, not simply on these issues, so it asked the BBC to report on progress since the 2013 report.

The Trust welcomes the work reflected in the BBC's progress report and the clear commitment BBC News has given to breadth of opinion. We also welcome the evidence demonstrating the BBC's determination to achieve a range of views on very challenging and often long-running stories, such as coverage of events in Iraq, Syria and Ukraine. The detail provided by the Executive on the range of contributors and viewpoints it has secured on these stories, despite many obstacles, is encouraging. The Trust appreciates the difficulties involved in securing breadth of opinion in conflict zones, and recognises the lengths that committed BBC teams go to in order to accomplish it.

The Executive believes that its decision to charge News Editors with overseeing coverage of specific stories across all BBC output has contributed to ensuring that a wide range of views is aired. This appears to be a useful development following on from the 'story champions' recommended in the original review.

The Trust notes the progress the BBC reports in delivering breadth of opinion in its coverage of the European Union. The BBC cites its unmediated coverage of EU proceedings on BBC Parliament and Democracy Live; the very large number of MEPs whose views have featured directly in BBC content; and the considerable volume of stories, background information, views and links now available in the Europe section of the BBC News website. This is an invaluable resource which only the BBC offers in such detail. Recognising that the UK's relationship with the rest of Europe seems likely to remain one of the most contentious issues in public policy over the next few years, the Trust requires the BBC to continue the search for the broadest range of voices and opinions that may inform public debate.

Similarly, immigration seems set to remain a key public policy issue, with a multiplicity of arguments to be heard and positions to be explored. We note the BBC's assurances of the range of views on immigration being reflected in its output, and the Trust wants the BBC to continue finding new voices to broaden this range still further.

The Trust acknowledges the work of the BBC College of Journalism in increasing the level of awareness among content producers of religious and ethical issues. The College offers a resource unique in the broadcasting industry, and the Trust strongly supports the BBC in bringing in-service training to its journalists. The Trust urges the BBC to monitor the uptake of such training rigorously. The Trust remains of the view, however, that the best way to ensure that BBC content is well-informed about religious, ethical and cultural diversity is for content producers to reflect more accurately the makeup of modern Britain.

We are satisfied that the BBC Executive is taking steps to improve breadth of opinion in many areas. However, the Trust recognises that the breadth of views expressed in broadcasting can never match the infinite variety of opinions held by the population as a whole. So finding new voices and new perspectives should be a perpetual objective of producers and editors, and the Trust expects the Executive to ensure that these challenges are debated constantly at the heart of the editorial process.

As the 2015 General Election approaches, we know that audiences will turn in huge numbers to the BBC for information which is accurate, authoritative, and impartial. Bringing them the widest range of ideas and perspectives and giving due weight to majorities while reflecting a multiplicity of minorities, are key ways in which the Trust expects the BBC to discharge its unique responsibilities as the nation's most trusted source of news.

EXECUTIVE UPDATE ON BREADTH OF OPINION IMPARTIALITY REVIEW

Overview

In July 2013, the Trust published its Breadth of Opinion Impartiality Review, and the Executive's response to this Review. The Trust asked for an update from the Executive in the summer of 2014 on progress in seven areas. This paper provides this update.

The search for breadth of opinion lies at the heart of all editorial decision-making and remains a priority for BBC News. Each day in our editorial meetings we outline and review the big stories of the day and question their direction of travel. With a newly introduced meeting structure, which includes video links to our editors across the United Kingdom, we place this search at the centre of our newsgathering.

Some stories will continue to merit mainstream political or institutional reaction, at least in their initial stages. On others it will be clear that we need to cast our net more widely from the start. But the search is a key part of our decision making and this report will demonstrate how our thinking has evolved since the publication of the Breadth of Opinion report.

The use of 'stand-back' moments at News Group Board and of story champions on big stories

BBC News previously stated that the duty of being a 'story champion' should be carried out by people whose jobs meant they were closely involved in the story and who would have the journalistic authority to shape the coverage. The role of the story champion has been superseded by new structures put in place by the Director of News, but the idea remains.

The work is carried on through two new posts – a News Editor and a deputy – whose jobs are to drive significant stories across all outlets and bring together teams to work on specific longer-running stories. Examples include the 'Trojan Horse' story (claims that some Muslim groups were attempting to take control of a number of schools in Birmingham), British Jihadis fighting in Syria and Iraq, and the sex grooming cases in Rotherham and Rochdale.

New tools which have developed over the past year are helping us with this approach. A special section of the journalism portal can now track the interviews which each programme is bidding for or carrying out. Every area working on a particular story can input this information.

The agenda for the last nine months has been dominated by a number of big foreign news stories which have taken up large amounts of airtime. The ability to find a broad spread of opinion on the ground has proved difficult for safety reasons. Ukraine, Syria/Iraq and the war in Gaza have proved to be extremely challenging environments for our teams in the field. There is the danger

posed by ordnance (Gaza and Ukraine), and the targeting of foreign journalists for kidnap (Syria/Iraq). We have aimed to supplement the search for a spread of opinion through interviews done by our teams in London, often on the phone or via our overseas bureaux.

On the ground in Gaza it was often difficult to find English-speaking representatives of Hamas who were willing to talk to us. Instead, Palestinian voices tended to be heard from Ramallah. It was also hard to find a range of opinions in Israel, reflecting polls which put support for Netanyahu at more than 90 per cent. We sought a breadth of opinion from around the world through programmes such as 'World Have Your Say'.

In Ukraine, over and above the reaction of protestors, the Kiev government and the West, BBC News has made conspicuous efforts to explain President Putin's motives, and the importance of Crimea to Russia.

We tackled the story from a variety of angles: military, political, and the impact on the economies of Ukraine and Russia, as well as on the global economy as a result of sanctions. We made sure we reflected Russian public opinion via material provided by our Moscow correspondent. It was difficult, however, to find Russian voices which disagreed with Putin's strategy perhaps for fear of taking a dissenting position. We embedded with both Ukrainian and Russian forces.

In Iraq, we put teams into Baghdad and the north to tell the story of the ISIS success. John Simpson took considerable risks in travelling around Iraq to interview leading clerics, both Sunni and Shia, including a trip to Karbala to interview Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most influential Shia cleric.

We have, however, struggled to gain the views of other key players in the region, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Saudi Arabia does not issue many visas and Qatar has proved reticent.

The BBC is committed to providing extensive impartial coverage of the political landscape in the UK and in Europe. The search for breadth of opinion forms a key part of our newsgathering.

BBC Parliament and Democracy Live are committed to providing unmediated transmissions of many European Union proceedings. Much coverage therefore will quite properly include a wide range of elected figures and examine the work of the EU institutions. For example, the 'Daily Politics' and 'Sunday Politics' programmes interviewed, on 172 occasions, 51 of the 73 UK MEPs between September 2012 and March 2014.

Within this framework, we aim to broadcast a wide range of opinion. BBC Parliament has covered a range of views on topics such as the horsemeat scandal, match-fixing and corruption in sport, tobacco packaging, US surveillance activities and Ukraine.

The BBC News website, which has its own dedicated Europe section, includes a blog (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs/eu/>) where BBC journalists in Brussels and across the continent point audiences to diverse opinions and analysis they might not otherwise see.

Radio 5Live's format lends itself readily to seeking breadth of opinion. A 'Your Call' phone-in after the Euro elections took more than 200 calls from listeners.

Radio 5Live also produces a weekly 'desk' from Europe in its 'Up All Night' programme which rounds up news from a different country for 20 minutes each week, reporting stories and views which might not otherwise be broadcast.

Eyewitness journalism has been important, too, in finding a range of voices. Matthew Price reported from Romania in early December 2013, for Radio, TV and Online, when UK fears of immigration from the EU seemed to be at their height: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25181501>. He talked both to people who were thinking of moving to the UK but also to many others who would look elsewhere in Europe – a point rarely picked up by other media.

When mass migration from Romania and Bulgaria was feared by some in the run up to the end of the transitional EU controls on free movement on 1 January 2014, Gavin Hewitt in Bulgaria and Mark Easton in Boston, Lincolnshire, examined myth and reality, and the many different sides of the argument.

The role of the Multimedia Editor or others in co-ordinating coverage

The Multimedia Editor initially helped to co-ordinate BBC News' approach to stories across different platforms in the wake of the Breadth of Opinion review.

The restructuring, described earlier meant this co-ordinating role was no longer required and overall responsibility for breadth of opinion was given to the News Editor and the deputies, supported by 'Big Story' meetings, and the daily and weekly editorial discussions. There are many examples of this work under both old and new structures.

One example of this was the Syrian attack on Ghouta in August 2013, when opposition activists claimed rockets with toxic agents had been launched as part of a major bombardment of rebel forces. As footage emerged of people gasping for breath and convulsing, the Multimedia Editor led the organisation of coverage across outlets, leading to a consistency of approach in verifying pictures, attributing sources, and deciding what should be used on earlier outlets and what passed the threshold for later use.

The Multimedia Editor helped bring together the work of the Turkey-based Syria team, the World Affairs Unit, and the Home Affairs and Regional teams. Drawing together expertise, the team delivered a profile of the first British suicide bomber for 'Newsnight', and a wide range of interviews.

In the 'Trojan horse' story, there were many perspectives to consider, both about education and Islamophobia. We needed to take the audience through the claims and counter-claims and put the story clearly into context. The 'Today' programme presented an edition from Birmingham, interviewing the parents of Park View school and speaking to Chair of Governors, Tahir Alam, who emphatically rejected the 'standard line' of media reporting.

With the World Service now an integrated part of the licence fee-funded operation, a Language Services Editor has guided editorial meetings on the story in Ukraine, as have his counterparts

from BBC Africa on the Nigerian kidnappings, from BBC Arabic on the war in Syria and from the Turkish Service on the mining disaster.

In addition to the regular editorial meetings, the Director of News and News Group Board members now have a weekly meeting with specialist correspondents and editors where they discuss stories and strategies.

The discussions have helped to ensure that, more widely across the organisation, producers are aware of the need to challenge their own assumptions on the shared consensus on any story. The Middle East Editor and the Science Editor have also both attended News Group Board meetings to outline their overview of their subject areas.

Encouragingly, 'stand-back' meetings have led to analogous 'stand-back' moments on air. In Syria, when the rebel armies decided to withdraw from Homs, Paul Wood, who had covered the story from the outset, gave the full context of the event by reflecting on his experience of reporting from the city.

Dissemination of opinion gathered by the audience response team

Audience Services:

- a) The overnight feedback reports contain a summary of everything our audiences are telling us about our UK-wide broadcasts. During the past year the scope was extended to include reaction to BBC Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland output, and BBC News online content. The audience verbatims are reproduced in full, and are divided into comments, complaints and appreciations. These reports are available to all BBC staff.
- b) The BBC website has been improved to make it easier to contact the BBC online, and there has been a noticeable uptick in the volume of comments and appreciations since. A report and analysis of the online activity, together with a review of activity and issues discussed on social media, is circulated daily.
- c) The early morning summary of the key issues in audience reaction is also circulated daily. Like the feedback reports, it is divided into comments, complaints and appreciations, and it is widely read and valued by BBC staff.
- d) The internal 'audiences portal' which gathers audience research insight and daily feedback reports to make available for all staff is currently being redesigned and improved for launch in 2015.

Audience Services are aware that spontaneous audience reaction is by its nature self-selecting. This, however, can sometimes be an early indicator on the overnight audience logs that a strand of opinion may have been missed by producers because it means we get contacted by smaller groups of society that might be hard to reach for traditional market research (e.g. fans of women's football). As our data is self-selecting, there is extensive complementary audience research available to all staff via the audiences portal.

BBC News Marketing and Audiences:

- a) Since 2008 BBC News has been tracking audience interest in 15 news stories each week – a mix of regular themes (e.g. developments in UK politics, news about immigration, developments in the EU, the UK and world economy) and breaking headlines of that week. One thousand UK adults (via a survey on the BBC's pulse panel) are asked how closely they are following each story, which stood out, and which stories they want to know more about. Results go far and wide in various formats (including as part of the weekly summary to BBC Executive Team and monthly to the News Group Board) and a summary is emailed out to all of BBC News each fortnight. Details are also published on the internal audiences portal.
- b) When a significant story breaks or a big theme is key, BBC News runs a more detailed survey about BBC coverage. There have been 48 so-called 'deep dive' surveys since January 2013. Findings are generally communicated via email, but are also archived on the audiences portal so everyone has access. Surveys have included Syria, the run-up to the Scottish referendum, NHS reforms, snow, immigration, and the Local/European elections in 2014.
- c) Starting in 2013, BBC News has also carried out qualitative research on big stories. It uses a new research methodology, called 'StoryBoard'. The StoryBoard sessions look at how audiences feel about these key stories and identify how BBC News can better engage audiences and help them understand coverage. Topics include 'immigration' and 'coverage of the EU'. Both reports highlight the importance of using a range of views (experts and real people) in our coverage. Other StoryBoard reports covered include: international news (Syria and North Korea), NHS and Benefits changes and the Scottish referendum. All the StoryBoard reports are available via the audiences portal.

Cross-promotion of BBC services

BBC News aims to cross-promote from its broadcast coverage to its website on big stories. It does so by creating special aggregation pages.

Examples include:

www.bbc.co.uk/nigeriakidnap
www.bbc.co.uk/scotlandsfuture
www.bbc.co.uk/ukraine
www.bbc.co.uk/syria
www.bbc.co.uk/vote2014

As a matter of course, 'Panorama' and other long-form programmes produce short versions of the highlights of their investigations for use on the full range of news outlets.

Separately, BBC Marketing and Audiences devotes considerable effort to cross-promotion, and has a good sense of what does and does not work, tailoring content as appropriate.

Marketing and Audiences also makes the most of new opportunities. For example, the iPlayer has a 'featured feed' to hidden gems, which has increased audience numbers. For example, 'Hip Hop Hoax' on BBC Four had 248k iPlayer views compared to 177k for its linear transmission; iPlayer views for 'Hospital Food' were double the viewing figures for its BBC One audience when scheduled as a feature prominence on iPlayer. The new iPlayer, launched in March, has also increased the cross-promotion possibilities.

There have also been some individual cross-promotions when related topics appear in different parts of the BBC's output.

For example, last year BBC Three had a documentary called 'Old before My Time' which was about alcohol consumption. It included an end credit trail for 'Newsbeat's Booze Calculator'.

The Crime and Punishment season, also on BBC Three, included a programme by a reformed criminal, who was also a guest on the Radio 1 'Sunday Surgery'.

'Newsbeat' carried out a crime and punishment survey and included a promotion for the BBC Three season when it reported the results.

Cross-promotion of output, whilst not increasing breadth of opinion, raises awareness of programmes and awareness of extra information available from the BBC thereby helping increase engagement with the BBC.

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 Executive's research, commissioned by the Head of Religion and Ethics, was aimed at finding out who the audience for religious content is, their attitudes towards BBC religious programming, and how they can be better served.

Its findings demonstrate differences among adherents of different religions, and their perceptions of the BBC's religious content.

Most of it is not relevant to the question of whether the BBC is achieving due impartiality in its coverage of religion, but it does reveal some striking information about the differences in the way adherents of different religions think about their faith, and think about the BBC's content. The 2011 Census established that, in the UK, the number of Christians is falling, the number with no religion is rising, and the numbers of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs are rising¹.

The Executive conducted qualitative research along with a quantitative study amongst a nationally representative sample, directed at understanding the nature of the audience for religious programming and the potential for religious content on the BBC.

¹ The census questions on religion are not the same across the four nations of the UK, so this summary is a broad simplification

It examined what previous academic work had identified as three characteristics of religion – practice, affiliation and belief. The census figures apply to affiliation.

The Executive's research found that rates of practice and belief vary widely. Around 60% of those respondents who identify as Christian stated that they do not in fact practise their religion by, for example, regularly attending church or taking part in religious activities.

The corresponding figure for other religions is 20%. Similarly, just 17% of Christians describe their belief as "extremely strong", but the equivalent for Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus is 44% and 28% for the Jewish faith.

These differences may have an impact on the way people view religion, its role in their own life and society as a whole. They may also have an impact on how people assess religion and faith on TV and radio.

The research also found that audiences regarded religious programming, even about their own religion, as more important for society as a whole than to them personally, and they also expressed interest in religious programming about religions other than their own.

This seems tied to the finding, unsurprising for a survey of those with a religious affiliation, that religion itself is a force for good in society.

However, that finding is not born out when participants were asked about their own consumption of religious programming. That showed they were more likely to watch television programmes about their own religion, though the effect is less marked for radio content. It may be the case that there is a degree of monitoring of what others say about their religion.

We are in the process of reviewing audience opinion regarding religious output and reviewing the structures currently in place for the delivery of programming across the BBC thereby ensuring a co-ordinated approach for all religion and ethics broadcasting and removing the need for a pan-BBC forum on religion and ethics.

This research will form the basis of how we best serve audiences and reflect the diversity of faiths and opinions in our programming going forward.

The use of training and the College of Journalism in raising the general level of knowledge about religion and ethics amongst programme makers

The BBC College of Journalism (CoJo) continues to offer the online module on religion, covering Islam, Buddhism, The Free Churches, Sikhism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Hinduism and the Church of England.

These sit within the Subject Guides section which is popular with users inside and outside the BBC. In the period September 2013 to September 2014, there were 2,002 page views and 1,532 unique users.

The BBC Academy, of which CoJo is just one part, also covers religion in its Diversity: Out of the Box and Unconscious Bias training. Statistics for Diversity: Out of the Box show 3,105 people have completed the course with 663 in progress. We do not currently have statistics for the Unconscious Bias training course. One of the aims of the Expert Women initiative was to recruit new speakers on Islam. Four female speakers on Islam have attended Expert Women training and networking events and at least one of them has appeared on air.

How the Executive is ensuring content producers are challenging their own assumptions on the shared consensus on any story

This applies almost exclusively to BBC News, which has a number of measures in place. Firstly, the daily Director of News conference at 08.40, which includes representatives of the UK Nations, reviews current stories.

The newly appointed News Editor chairs a conference of the editors of all outlets and platforms at 09.00 daily. This enables senior journalists to take an overview of BBC coverage and drive it in the required direction.

Away from the pressures of daily journalism, members of the News Leadership group attend monthly leadership lunches which hear from outside guests from the world of industry and politics.

And the Director of News chairs the regular 'Big Stories' sessions, where BBC specialist correspondents discuss developments in long-running stories with senior journalists from across the BBC.

Recent sessions have covered Islamist extremism, and the European elections. Past sessions, such as one on climate change, included participants from science programmes.

In addition, seminars are organised to discuss breaking stories as well as key issues coming up.

BBC World Service for example has held seminars on Rwanda, 20 years after the genocide; and The Thailand Coup: What next? as well as a seminar on the Afghan Elections.

BBC News and Analysis holds regular seminars on key issues such as The Iraq Crisis Explained and the team provides daily briefings on issues.

The Executive also benefits from the Trust's own impartiality seminars, which give senior figures from around the BBC an opportunity to hear a range of perspectives from experts and practitioners.