

## **BBC TRUST SEMINAR ON IMPARTIALITY AND ECONOMIC REPORTING 6 NOVEMBER 2012**

In a review of BBC governance led by the BBC Trust Chairman Lord Patten, published in July 2011, the Trust committed to strengthening its work in ensuring that the BBC's standards of impartiality are being met - and are seen to be being met. As part of this, the Trust announced the introduction of regular impartiality seminars that look at emerging and current topics. Unlike the existing impartiality reviews carried out by the Trust, these would not be based on retrospective analysis of BBC output, but would instead enable the BBC to consider how to approach current and topical issues, which pose difficulties for programme makers, with due impartiality.

The first of these seminars, on impartiality and economic reporting, was held on 6 November 2012. The aim of the seminar was to examine the principles being applied by the BBC and the dilemmas it faces in reporting on this complex topic and to help the BBC maintain a dialogue with all relevant interests, both inside and outside the BBC, on delivery of impartiality in this area. The seminar would review how the BBC can ensure its news coverage of economics issues reflects the full range of views and voices and, for example, avoids giving undue weight to specific institutional perspectives.

The seminar was held under the Chatham House rule, which allows the discussion to be reported but views expressed cannot be attributed to specific individuals. A summary of the event is set out below, which is not a verbatim record of all the points made but aims to summarise the main points of discussion. However, a full list of attendees can be found below.

The seminar started with a presentation from Professor Steve Schifferes on public attitudes to reporting on the economic crisis (more details on this research can be found at <http://www.city.ac.uk/arts-social-sciences/academic-staff-profiles/professor-steve-schifferes>). The headlines were:

- Economic coverage is very important to audiences and the public is very concerned about the crisis. They don't understand it fully, would like coverage to relate more to their own circumstances and are sceptical about whether they are getting fair and balanced coverage.
- The vast majority are following economic news closely, and there has been a big increase in interest, which hasn't faded since the 2008 Lehman crisis.
- There is greater interest in economic news than in most other specialist categories, eg. political and celebrity news. This is a challenge, for economic reporters, as they are addressing a non-expert audience.
- The BBC plays an important part - 55% of respondents say they turn to the BBC for trustworthy information on the economic crisis.
- However, half the public feel they don't really understand economic news, and only half say they are fairly or very satisfied.
- The surveys reveal a general lack of trust in business journalists across the media, with a strong feeling that there is too much economic jargon; while only 22 per cent say journalists give a fair and balanced picture. The same pattern applies to BBC journalists as to all economic journalists. He noted that this lack of trust is a reflection of public anger about the economic crisis.

Professor John Van Reenan of the London School of Economics, and Andrew Sentance of PricewaterhouseCoopers, then spoke about their views on impartiality and economic reporting; the discussion was then opened up to all participants.

Participants in general regarded the BBC's economics coverage as of high quality and impartial. Some noted it had improved over the past ten years, pre-dating the onset of the financial crisis.

Several noted that many of the challenges apply to economics reporting in general, in newspapers and other broadcasters as well as the BBC.

### **Complexity of the subject**

One challenge is explaining the subject to a non-specialist audience. As one contributor said, economic journalists have the biggest story around, people want to hear from us. The consequence, though, is that there is a tension between explaining in everyday terms and making links to jobs and personal finances, and explaining the big picture and the complexities. One participant encouraged the BBC to continue wrestling with educating the widest possible audience about the big picture issues for the economy. Another argued that complexity could hide important issues, and it was essential to tackle them, even though most members of the audience have the greatest interest in subjects of immediate concern to them like benefits, the jobs outlook and personal finances. Another noted that the level of understanding of economics in the population generally is low, and that the BBC has a unique educational role (both because of its reach and its Public Purposes) in tackling that. Difficult as it is, it is important to explain to audiences what the Spanish bond rate is and why it matters to them.

### **Consensus versus range of opinions**

A number of comments concerned the question of whether BBC coverage should reflect a consensus view, in areas where there is one, or whether instead it must reflect the range of opinions even if parts of that range are minority views. There was disagreement about this, but most thought the range of opinions was essential for two reasons. One is that macroeconomics itself does not have the same kind of clear consensus now that applied before 2008 – economics is having its own crisis – and it could be difficult to conclude that a certain view was definitive or authoritative. The second reason, for a number of speakers, is that an important part of the job in economics reporting is specifically challenging a dominant narrative. One person argued that not only is the consensus often wrong, there is also a tendency for political narratives to shape the way the economy is reported. One participant argued that impartiality depended in part on the confidence and experience of the correspondents, who had to make judgements, while being constantly vigilant against developing fixed habits of thought.

A number of contributors spoke of the need to challenge both intellectual and institutional orthodoxies. One participant said it seemed harder for the BBC than for other economic broadcasters and the newspapers to present counter-intuitive views.

### **Use of contributors**

There was considerable discussion of what kind of contributors should be used by BBC journalists. It was pointed out that lobby groups can have views that are extreme or not well supported by economic evidence. Some organisations use their economists mainly to generate PR. Academics have deeper knowledge but some also hold extreme views, and not all perform well on radio and TV. Opinion in the room was divided about the merits of confrontational debates between different economists, for example on the Today programme or Newsnight. Some participants argued that there was a need to challenge economics experts who had changed position in the same way that politicians would be challenged on why their view had changed.

### **Political perspectives**

Many of those present noted that there is at present a particular challenge in reporting the economy when political perspectives on the economy are highly polarised, and the BBC is the subject of intense scrutiny and pressure from political parties on its economic coverage.

One participant gave as an example a view that the difference between the fiscal policies of those in politics advocating 'austerity' and those advocating 'stimulus' was relatively small. The issue for the public to understand about the case for getting public spending down to its 2003 level is that the UK is poorer than we thought it was going to be, when fiscal plans were made before the crisis.

### **Use of statistics**

There was a discussion of the reliance on the flow of official statistics in economic reporting. These are often revised over time – for example, the recession of the early 1990s is now known to have been shorter and less severe than we thought from the statistics at the time, but that was not known until a decade later. There are also inconsistencies and puzzles in the current data on the economy. Several participants thought too much emphasis is placed on changes in GDP, and other types of evidence need to be reported, from other types of statistics to the results of quantitative economic research on policy issues such as welfare policy or education.

As one economist taking part said, the subject's knowledge has advanced a lot in microeconomic policy areas like these, in contrast to understanding of the macroeconomic issues. Bringing this understanding to the public needed other specialist correspondents in areas like health or education to be aware of the economic research in their fields.

### **Demands of TV news**

The restrictions imposed by the need for news to be new, and by the conventions or 'grammar' of broadcasting were also debated. Journalists were aware of the risk of limiting the subjects covered because of the need for interesting pictures on the TV news; others were concerned to avoid false certainty and spurious precision.

In particular, several people argued for giving a more varied picture of the economy. One argued that there was over-emphasis on finance and the public sector, which account for just over a fifth of output or employment, whereas important sectors such as energy and business services were under-reported. Another pointed out that attention needs to be paid to geographical spread, as well as range of sectors, in covering the economy.

One participant noted that a lot of the audience gets news about the economy from other types of programme apart from the main TV news bulletins and 'opinion former' programmes like Today or Newsnight - such as the regional news programmes or local radio, Radio 1 and 2 bulletins and Breakfast news.

There was an appetite – among this group of economists and economics journalists – for more coverage of the economy, and in more depth than is possible on news programmes. It is hard to explain complex

economic issues within the constraints of 'hard' news reporting. Features and longer programmes help to fill the gap. Journalists had to balance this with how to present big picture issues in addition to the daily news flow.

There was some discussion about the geographical focus of coverage, with one participant arguing that the BBC focused on the USA and Europe, despite the fact that the Asia-Pacific region is driving the coverage. Other participants disagreed and said that the BBC was increasingly deploying more time in China and Asia on economics stories.

### **Next steps**

In examining the challenges faced by the BBC, the discussion highlighted the difficulties faced by all economic journalists in the media in explaining to the public the debates about the economy. Generally, participants in the discussion thought the BBC did a good job in meeting these challenges. There is a gap in public understanding that the BBC must continue to try and meet by explaining both the basic concepts and more complicated issues. A consistent theme that emerged was the importance of questioning, challenging and explaining, across all economic sectors, given the complexity and lack of certainty. Another consistent theme was ensuring that the BBC continues to reflect different opinions. As some participants observed, recent history has shown that the consensus in economics may prove not to be correct.

BBC Trust  
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