Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) wishes to express its disappointment and frustration at BBC News and Current Affairs coverage on the UK’s role in the international arms trade. We contend that coverage is inadequate and frequently biased, inaccurate and misleading.

For such an important subject there is very little coverage, and what coverage there is, is often biased, inaccurate and misleading.

In general, the arms trade is not considered newsworthy. Over the past five years, the UK arms exports have been given prominence only on a few occasions, notably when BAE Systems was under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office in 2009/10 and when the parliamentary Committees on Arms Exports Controls (CAEC) has issued reports critical of the government. There was some online news coverage of the progress of the Arms Trade Treaty at the UN, but almost no critical perspective of what it was or its likely effectiveness. To our knowledge, there has been no BBC television programme entirely devoted to the UK arms trade. BBC Radio 4 Face the Facts and other strands have occasionally produced programmes on a specific aspect of the arms trade (eg Lifecycle of a bullet, Radio 4, September 2012).

There is a tendency to focus on the technological aspects of weaponry, especially that produced by BAE Systems, without discussion on the background and context, including the destructive nature of the weaponry. Rather the focus is on the "Top Gear" imagery and presentation. A good example is the "How to build" series, which in 2010 featured three arms companies -QinetiQ (engineering projects), BAE (Astute nuclear submarine) and Rolls-Royce (aircraft engines). A similar approach is also displayed in news packages, For example, Newsnight's three-minute package on the DSEi arms fair on 11 September 2013 consisted mainly of footage of exhibitor pavilions and weaponry in a deliberately jaunty and upbeat style.

Allied to this, is the insidious way in which arms industry views are presented within packages without opposing views being given airtime. One key example is how arms industry figures for jobs and exports are presented as hard fact, rather than being challenged by interviewers or other interviewees. For example, at the time of the DSEi arms fair in September 2013, the figure of 300,000 or (sometimes) 400,000 arms industry jobs was routinely quoted, together with an annual arms export figure of £22 billion, rather than challenged as good journalism would demand.

CAAT press release frequently link to an analysis of the official figures and CAAT and other organisations do challenge such statistics in debates but these debates rarely happen. The principal reason is that the arms industry trade bodies and companies usually decline to nominate spokespeople or representatives, or if they do, insist or being interviewed separately. This was one of the reasons put forward by Newsnight for not holding a studio discussion after the arms fair package (the other was that there wasn't sufficient time).

BBC Editorial Guidelines state: "We should normally identify on-air and online sources of information and significant contributors, and provide their credentials, so that our audiences can judge their status." (3:4:12) and "We should not automatically assume that contributors from other organisations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities) are unbiased, and we may need to make it clear to the audience when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint, if it is not apparent from their contribution or from the context in which their contribution is made." (4.4.14)

Yet on the rare occasions when a debate does take place, the arms industry representatives are usually titled as "defence analysts" or researchers. In this respect it is important to note that the most vociferous of the arms industry defenders is Howard Wheeldon, who is routinely described as an "independent defence consultant". This would suggest that he is an academic or researcher. In fact, Mr Wheeldon for has worked as an arms industry specialist in a number of city firms providing economic analysis and political support for the arms industry, before joining ADS, the arms industry trade body, in 2012 as director of Policy, Public Affairs and Media. Since leaving ADS, he runs his own consultancy business "specialising in defence industrial support, advisory work, research, media support and media training". However, this background information is not given to
listeners or viewers.

The reverse can also happen. Campaign Against Arms Trade is a long established organisation which conducts extensive and well regarded research into the arms trade yet is rarely called to debate on the issue. For example, after an initial approach by the producers of the Moral Maze in March 2013 to contribute to a programme on business and human rights, focusing on the arms trade, it was decided not to invite CAAT because its views were too “morally absolute”. Needless to say, the ubiquitous Howard Wheeldon was a participant.

On a separate issue, CAAT is disturbed to find occasions when BBC journalists have agreed to host or support arms industries conferences and other events. In March 2012, Security Correspondent Frank Gardner was due to present awards at the Counter Terror Expo dinner, thus explicitly endorsing the event. After his participation was revealed in The Independent, he stepped down. In March 2013, Security Correspondent Gordon Corera chaired a closed session in a event at the Security and Policing Exhibition, an arms fair in all but name. Currently the dinner of ADS (the trade organisation for the Aerospace, Defence and Space industries) is advertising Political Editor Nick Robinson as its guest speaker.

BBC Editorial Guidelines state: External activities of individuals working for the BBC must not undermine the public’s perception of the impartiality, integrity, independence and objectivity of the BBC. Nor should they bring the BBC into disrepute. (15.2.1) and “The BBC must be satisfied that individuals involved in the production of its content are free from inappropriate outside commitments and connections.” (15.2.3)

CAAT believes that such engagements undermine the BBC’s own Editorial Guidelines on independence, impartiality and objectivity and urges that there should be greater oversight to ensure that similar engagements are not entered into in future.