

Impartiality Review of BBC Reporting of Statistics - Terms of Reference

Background

Ensuring the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's content is a key priority for the Trust; it is essential to its independence that the BBC retains the public's trust as an impartial and accurate purveyor of news and programming. The BBC is required to deliver duly accurate and impartial news by the Royal Charter and Agreement and to treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality. The Trust is committed to making sure that the BBC fulfils this obligation.

Impartiality reviews allow the Trust to examine the BBC's impartiality in a specific area of output through a rigorous review which can, when deemed necessary, lead to change.

This will be the Trust's seventh impartiality review. Recent reviews looked at rural affairs (2014), breadth of opinion (2013), coverage of the events known as the Arab Spring (2012) and science coverage (2011).

The scope of the review

This review covers the reporting of statistics on news and current affairs output, primarily network coverage on radio, television and online. However it will include a selection of news and current affairs output in the Nations. It excludes drama, music and entertainment.

In assessing the BBC's coverage, the review will consider issues of accuracy, context and balance as follows:

- To assess whether BBC UK public services news and current affairs output achieves due impartiality and accuracy on controversial subjects when it includes statistical analysis
- To establish more generally whether the BBC provides duly accurate and impartial reporting of statistics in its UK public services news and current affairs output
- To assess whether BBC output provides accessible, critical analysis when reporting statistics to enable audiences to understand the issues
- To assess whether BBC content demonstrates due impartiality and accuracy through appropriate challenge and scrutiny of context in its reporting of statistics cited by third parties.

In summary, it will ask whether the BBC's reporting of statistics provides audiences with the necessary context and analysis needed to have an informed understanding of controversial subjects and areas of public policy. The panel may make recommendations for improvement. The review takes place in the light of the BBC's public purpose to sustain citizenship and civic society by providing high-quality news, current affairs and factual programming that keeps audiences informed and supports debate about important issues and political developments in an engaging way.

Scope limitations

Impartiality reviews are not performance reviews and will not evaluate quality or consider market impact.

While impartiality is an important part of any assessment of programme quality, it is not the only factor. As this review focuses on impartiality, it will not seek to draw broader conclusions about the quality of BBC output.

Approach

The BBC Editorial Guidelines (which can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines>) set out how impartiality is to be attained in BBC content.

The Trust report will draw on an assessment from an independent panel chaired by Jil Matheson. Audience research and content analysis will be commissioned to support the review. The Trust will expect the panel to make substantial use of that research. The panel will be supported during the review by a Senior Adviser from the Trust Unit.

The main work streams of the review will include:

- Engagement with key stakeholders
- Submissions from the BBC Executive
- Audience research
- Content Analysis

Timetable

- June 2015 - announce the subject and panel for the impartiality review
- June to Dec 2015 - content analysis to be carried out, interviews and written submissions gathered
- Jan 2016 - audience research carried out
- Jan to June 2016 - analysis and drafting
- June 2016 - Report to the Trust for final approval with Executive Response, and publication
- July 2016 - Annual Report and Accounts