



BBC impartiality and the problem of bias

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August 2023

First published: August 2023

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Summary

- The BBC is at the crossroads with questions facing its future as a privileged national broadcaster backed by the licence fee.
- Subscriptions have fallen by 500,000 since last year, to 24.3 million while levels of trust have fallen from 75 per cent of adults in 2018 to 55 per cent in 2022, according to one study.
- The disconnect is most pronounced among working-class households.
- The BBC is assailed by populist critics who allege it has become unmoored from the values of ordinary British people. They have a point.
- Studies have demonstrated bias in the BBC's output in news, factual and comedic output.
- The bias should not be understood in terms of traditional left and right, but rather more to do with 'cultural' values, that pertain often to things like race, sexuality, and gender.
- There is a cultural divide within the BBC with particularly younger cohorts blurring the lines between activism and reporting.
- The director general Tim Davie is trying to re-instil the BBC's ethos of impartiality, however this has been resisted by some who see it as an attempt to bring the BBC to heel.
- But he is right to do since the BBC is clearly biased and alienating working-class viewers. It cannot continue in this vein, when it is bound by its charter to represent the views of the breadth of the country.
- Affirmative action programmes that seek to recruit based on class may not be the answer, however. The BBC currently has a target to make 25 per cent of its workforce drawn from working-class backgrounds.
- This report looks at examples of articles published on the BBC's educational websites, namely BBC Bitesize and Teach.
- Numerous articles are found which potentially breach the BBC's Editorial Guidelines on impartiality.
- Articles present an account of American race relations that privileges the role of extremist organisations like the Black Panthers but overlook the role of the black church.
- Much attention is devoted to the role of Britain in the slave trade, only its suppression of it is overlooked.
- Activists who wish to 'decolonise the curriculum' and to encourage museums to 'display it like you stole it' are presented without challenge or criticism.

- Environmentalist activists like Greta Thunberg are presented as just regular kids and not the political radicals they really are.
- Material from a campaigning organisation is presented uncritically to allow the BBC to paint the media as hostile to Muslims.
- BBC Bitesize articles on gay and transgender issues present novel ideas as generally accepted and ignore the perspective of religious conservatives. One article linked to organisations that offers advice on dangerous activities including so-called 'chem sex'.
- Generally, the BBC seems to be extolling the young into political activism, although were such materials to be presented in any classroom, they would likely face questions of legality.
- It is recommended that the BBC gets back to doing what it does well, which is providing revision aides that allow young people, irrespective of background, to do well in education and leave the activism alone, in line with its commitments to impartiality.

Introduction

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is at the crossroads. Critics of all political stripes have often accused it of being in breach of its formal commitments to impartiality, which is necessary given its privileged position of being funded by the licence fee, worth £3.7 billion in 2022.¹ In recent years, the BBC has accepted that it has a ‘class problem’, specifically in that it fails to represent and understand the views of those who are, more often than not, of the working-class and who voted on the whole to leave the European Union. That decision took many within the BBC by surprise, as well as provoking bewilderment and even dismay among a recalcitrant minority.

The BBC had found itself in the classic bind of ‘taxation without representation’, and this was obviously untenable given the BBC’s commitment to impartiality. Yet attempts to address this have been resisted, with prominent BBC figures departing and then voicing their disquiet. They see the BBC’s attempts to address its bias as really an attempt to bring it to heel by the Conservative government. While they are correct to be wary, the evidence does show both biased output as well as declining levels of trust, more pronounced among the working-class. This could not be allowed to continue and if left unchecked would prove fatal. Under such conditions, the licence fee is harder to defend.

The bias is not just a matter for news and public affairs. Critics have also pointed to factual broadcasting as well as light entertainment, where a soft-liberal bias seems to prevail, that often has little positive to say about Britain’s history. Meanwhile, anti-Tory and anti-Brexit comedians have ruled the roost, serving up a diet of unfunny derision. But what about its educational output? This report takes a look at some of the articles and material published on the BBC’s Bitesize and Teach websites. These provide educational materials for children and teachers. While this is not a scientific and representative sample, enough evidence is found to show a bias that persists in getting through, when BBC Editorial Guidelines ought to impede it.

What is found is the endorsement of political activists who are given close to a free rein to present their views without contest. Evidence is unearthed of radicals being featured along with contested ideas such as ‘decolonise the curriculum’. Radical political activists such as Greta Thunberg are endorsed, their views presented as consensus. Accounts of history are given that show extremist and criminal organisations (such as the Black Panthers) as part of the respectable political mainstream, when actually they were a radical and revolutionary alternative to it. A report by a campaign organisation was taken as authoritative and used to justify claims that the media was hostile to Muslims. The BBC defines ‘social justice’ and then recommends ‘positive discrimination’ as remedial – only this is illegal under the Equality Act 2010.

Essentially, there is a bias – whereby the BBC’s educational output looks to portray radical political activists as the most noble of political actors. Those who seek societal betterment

¹ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Dorries, N. (2022) *TV licence fee frozen for two years*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tv-licence-fee-frozen-for-two-years> (Accessed: 21 July 2022).

through the contest of ideas and compromise within the political democratic system are seldom singled out for praise. There is a problem here in that the BBC is encouraging the young into direct political conflict, often with the very same society that sustains them, at an age when they are ill-equipped for politics given their natural idealism, inevitable ignorance, and naivety. It seems adults have been taken in by the idea of children coming forward with the ideas, as well as moral authority to correct all our societal and environmental problems. But in derogating their own authority in this manner, they are setting up the young to fail.

A faction within the BBC realises its precarious predicament yet it is resisted. The BBC is making attempts to correct its progressive bias, most notably through affirmative action programmes to attract working-class people. But at times, it just cannot seem to help itself, as some of the evidence in this report would suggest. While there are many committed to impartiality within the BBC, who provide excellent work, there is also something of a cuckoo in the nest. A younger cadre is increasingly blurring the lines between reporting and activism. They see telling us about the world as purposeful; something that can be done to bring about societal change. The problem is they do not realise that what they want, namely an egalitarian society based on equality of outcomes for groups in terms of both economics and status, can only be achieved through restrictions on freedom leading to gross political inequality. Such an approach will inevitably entail not telling us about the things that fail to accord with their own morality and goals.

The BBC has come adrift from its Reithian compromise, namely not quite the patrician highs of Sir John Reith's intention – the BBC always managed to balance 'sweetness and light' with more popular tastes. The original working idea of the BBC was to tell the country about itself, as well as bring the 'best which has been thought and said' into the lives of ordinary people, plus a bit of fun thrown into the mix. Yet what we see now is a cultural conflict whereby some wish to move beyond this remit into agitating for change, with the young seen as agents in this great political struggle. Others are concerned simply with getting back to representation and impartiality.

The BBC is a behemoth of broadcasting, both television and radio, and now, thanks to the internet, digital print journalism. It is cumbersome and prone to scandal, costly and exists thanks to the licence fee. In such a light, perhaps its greatest offence in the eyes of many is an inability to resist its own sense of piety and moral purpose, despite all evidence to its many failures. Furthermore, it is given unrivalled protection from public scrutiny thanks to a get-out clause in the Freedom of Information Act that exempts anything held for the purposes of 'art, journalism or literature', which is defined as loosely as the BBC wishes. This report reveals almost half of requests under the act are rejected in this manner. It is obviously not something that can continue as things stand.

My gratitude is expressed to all at Civitas, most notably Dr Jim McConalogue and Frank Young, for their help on this and other reports I have published with them.

Chapter 1 – Where are we at with BBC bias?

Introduction

The debate on the BBC's impartiality rumbles on. In the past, numerous factions of British politics have alleged the BBC favours some things at the expense of others. Yet, recently we have seen the BBC tacitly admit it has a problem – in that it fails to deliver a product that includes the lives and views of much of the country. This comes in the wake of the democratic decision taken to leave the European Union, when by some accounts, the BBC was taken by surprise and struggled to fathom why anyone would wish for such a thing.

This chapter begins by exploring the BBC's formal commitments to impartiality, before assessing the evidence for bias. It then looks at the actions taken by Director General Tim Davie, as well as the reaction against him. It is argued that there is something of a turf war going on within, with some seeing in his actions not a necessary corrective, but a threat to BBC impartiality. It is also stressed that there is a younger cohort within the BBC that does not accept impartiality but believes in broadcasting as purposeful in building a better, egalitarian society. The problem with this is that not everyone who pays the licence fee has the same vision or values. The BBC has found itself in a position where it offers 'taxation without representation' to many. Davie is correct to try and address the situation since such a position is untenable for an organisation funded via a mandatory licence and with formal commitments to impartiality that are necessary to ensure both trust and acceptance. Yet, others so consumed by their own biases, fail to see this, and are determined to put up a fight to preserve the *status quo*.

What are the BBC's commitments and responsibilities on impartiality?

The BBC's *Royal Charter* outlines the corporation's governance and is renewed usually every 10 years. The first was granted in 1927; the most recent took effect in 2017 and will expire in 2027.² It forms the 'constitutional basis for the BBC', outlining its responsibilities and remit and serves as its legal foundation.³ The charter stipulates both that the BBC has an educational role and that it exercises whatever functions it may have with impartiality. It defines the BBC's mission as:

'The Mission of the BBC is to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain.'

The charter defines the BBC's 'public purposes' to include providing 'impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them', so as to allow people to understand the country and wider world in all its diversity. It further commits the BBC to 'support learning for people of all ages', including to 'provide specialist educational content to help support learning for children and teenagers across the United Kingdom.'

² Wikipedia, *BBC Charter*, Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Charter (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³ Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2016) *BBC Charter and Framework Agreement*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bbc-charter-and-framework-agreement> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

Thus, the charter details the BBC's right to provide educational materials but on the proviso that they be impartial. Its Editorial Guidelines outlines its stance on impartiality, making it clear the expectation extends across 'all its output.'

The concept in question is one of 'due impartiality', which can be thought of as a commitment to providing reasonable balance and diversity of perspectives, without obligation to challenge basic democratic principles such as the 'right to vote, freedom of expression and the rule of law.' As the guidelines state, 'We must always scrutinise arguments, question consensus and hold power to account with consistency and due impartiality.'

In covering political issues, they stress 'we must take care not to endorse those campaigns, or allow ourselves to be used to campaign to change public policy.' 'Omission of views or other material' can be a threat to impartiality. Artists, writers, and entertainers are expected to be allowed the freedom to discuss things from their own perspective, but as the guidelines say, it should be clear to audiences where personal views are being expressed. The guidelines further stipulate when dealing with matters of controversy, 'the existence of a range of views and their respective weights should be acknowledged' and should be presented accurately. BBC presenters and journalists should observe impartiality and audiences 'should not be able to tell from BBC output the personal opinions of our journalists or news and current affairs presenters'.

Moreover, the BBC should not 'automatically assume' that contributions from organisations and individuals (such as charities, think tanks and academics) are not without their own agendas. The BBC 'must remain independent from government initiatives, campaigners, charities and their agendas, no matter how apparently worthy the cause or how much their message appears to be accepted or uncontroversial.' The BBC must not 'embrace the agenda of any particular campaign groups or charities', treating them all equally and without especial favour.⁴

The BBC has firm rules on impartiality that offer sufficient flexibility to allow for broadcasting without rigidly striking an artificial balance that would mandate false equivalences. Room is made for controversial or minority-held views, but nevertheless, the BBC must avoid promoting any given editorial line. Views that are widely accepted, even scientific consensus, have to be contested from time to time, never to be allowed to ossify into dogma.

It is an admirable set of institutional rules, sophisticatedly written to permit a major broadcaster to function and thrive.

Where are we at with the BBC and bias?

Despite the sophistication of its editorial rules on impartiality, accusations against the BBC of impartiality are rife. While we might say that the BBC is biased, just as all organisations are biased, there is the expectation and necessity of impartiality given the BBC's privileged

⁴ BBC, *Section 4: Impartiality – Introduction*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/impartiality/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023). BBC, *Section 4: Impartiality – Guidelines*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/impartiality/guidelines/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

position as funded by the licence fee. While it may be true to say, as Elon Musk has, that the BBC is less biased than most other broadcasters,⁵ nevertheless we tend to expect better. No one would deny that the *Daily Telegraph* leans right or that *The Guardian* leans left, but there is never the expectation that they ought not to. Because the BBC levies a charge enforced by criminal sanction on all those who watch television and because of the massive resulting role it has in the broadcasting market, some might say distorting, the BBC has to remain neutral. If it strays from this position, then we are into the realms of ‘taxation without representation,’ meaning a basic injustice whereby an elite generates its income for its own purposes.

When looking at the debate on bias and the BBC the first thing that becomes apparent is that both the political left and right both will allege the BBC is biased against their own side. Consider the following from former culture secretary and Tory MP Nadine Dorries:

‘Are they [the BBC] bothering with impartiality anymore? The answer is no. The public are paying a fee/tax for a biased left-wing organisation which is seriously failing in its political representation, from the top down.’⁶

Contrast this with the following from the left-wing journalist Owen Jones:

‘For too long, the right has got away with weaving a fairy-tale of BBC left-wing bias. Until the left starts complaining – and loudly too – the BBC’s agenda will be shaped by supporters of government, big business, the free market and western foreign policy.’⁷

It is accused of bias against Hindus⁸ and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁹ Accusations of bias against Palestinians¹⁰ and Israelis are made.¹¹ Similarly, it is accused of bias both for and against Scottish separatism and the SNP.¹² It has faced accusations of bias against Jeremy Corbyn during his leadership of the Labour party.¹³ More accusations come over its handling of divisive political issues such as transgenderism.¹⁴ It will be accused of being

⁵ Badshah, N. (2023) ‘Musk admits BBC ‘among least biased’ in row over Twitter ‘government-funded media’ tag’, *The Guardian*, 10 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/apr/09/bbc-protests-after-twitter-labels-it-government-funded-media> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁶ Tobitt, C. (2021). ‘Nadine Dorries and the media: Licence fee sceptic who threatened to nail reporter’s testicles to the floor’, *Press Gazette*, 17 September. Available at: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/culture-secretary-nadine-dorries-and-the-media/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁷ Jones, O. (2014) ‘It’s the BBC’s rightwing bias that is the threat to democracy and journalism’, *The Guardian*, 17 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/17/bbc-leftwing-bias-non-existent-myth> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁸ *Hindu Post* (2023) ‘BBC’s anti-Bharat/anti-Hindu and pro-Islamic bias is an established fact’, 7 February. Available at: <https://hindupost.in/media/bbcs-anti-india-anti-hindu-and-pro-islamic-bias-is-an-established-fact/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁹ Ellis-Petersen, H. (2023) ‘What is the BBC Modi documentary and why is it so controversial?’, *The Guardian*, 14 February. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/14/why-is-bbc-report-on-narendra-modis-handling-of-sectarian-riots-in-2002-so-controversial?amp;_amp;_amp (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹⁰ Topple, S. (2021) A BBC report on Gaza shows its disgraceful bias. Available at: <https://www.thecanary.co/trending/2021/05/12/a-bbc-report-on-gaza-shows-its-disgraceful-bias/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹¹ Sloane, H. (2023). *Battling the BBC’s bias against Jews and Israel*. Available at: <https://www.ins.org/opinion/battling-the-bbcs-bias-against-jews-and-israel/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹² Grant, G. (2022) ‘BBC Scotland in the dock over ‘slavish’ SNP bias’, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 16 July. Available at: <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/scottish-daily-mail/20220716/281487870072852> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹³ Snowdon, K. (2016) ‘BBC’s ‘Biased’ Jeremy Corbyn Coverage Sparks Rows Between Broadcaster And Media Analyst’, *Huffington Post*, 29 July. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/bbc-biased-jeremy-corbyn-coverage-sparks-rows-broadcaster-author-media-report_uk_579b52e7e4b0f42daa4a2678 (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹⁴ Sanderson, D. (2019) ‘John Humphrys accuses BBC of bias in transgender debate’, *The Times*, 7 October. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/john-humphrys-accuses-bbc-of-bias-in-transgender-debate-t02gf2fmt> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

against religion, anti-capitalist, globalist, in favour of supranational government, against the countryside, vehemently opposed to Trump; the list goes on and on.

It is tempting to suggest that because all political factions complain, it means the BBC must be doing a good job. Here is one letter from a former BBC employee, published in *The Guardian*:

*'In 1984, I was appointed head of the BBC Bristol Network Production Centre. It was the time of the miners' strike. Every morning we received a shoal of letters complaining about the BBC's coverage. They fell into two broad categories: those who thought the BBC was a lackey of the right-wing establishment, and those who thought it was a subversive, lefty organisation. Every morning, we would sort the letters into two piles. And every morning, the piles were exactly the same height. These were people who had been watching exactly the same programmes. I rest my case.'*¹⁵

But there are good reasons why we should not accept this line. There is a substantial amount of evidence from independent studies to suggest political bias. Moreover, we have the testimonies of former BBC employees, as well as the BBC's own tacit admissions of bias. As we shall see, director general Tim Davie has made it the BBC's priority to restore impartiality, without in-so-many-words, admitting there is a problem. But if there is not, then why act?

Cardiff analysis, Newswatch research and the EU referendum

Much of the case for right-wing bias at the BBC hinges on a study conducted by researchers at the University of Cardiff. The Cardiff 'content analysis' was commissioned as part of an independent review into the breadth of opinion featured in BBC broadcasts (published 2013), led by television executive Stuart Prebble and commissioned by the now-defunct BBC Trust. Off the back of Prebble's review, the Trust declared the BBC 'delivered a good range of opinion and that it was impartial'.¹⁶ The content analysis, which was based on monitoring of BBC output on three topics (immigration, the European Union, and religion), concluded among other things,

*'Although political voices dominate, and the ruling party has a larger share of voice, the Conservative dominance in 2012 is by a notably larger margin than Labour dominance in 2007 (although the two governments were at different points in the electoral cycle), and there is only a relatively limited presence of Liberal Democrats across both years.'*¹⁷

Subsequently in 2013, one of the Cardiff authors, Mike Berry, published an article in effect disagreeing with the Trust's conclusion of impartiality and arguing the content analysis

¹⁵ *The Guardian* (2019) 'Letters: The BBC cannot dodge accusations of Tory bias', 5 December. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/dec/05/the-bbc-cannot-dodge-accusations-of-tory-bias> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹⁶ BBC Trust (2013) *A BBC Trust Review of the Breadth of Opinion Reflected in the BBC's Output*. Available at: https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/breadth_opinion.pdf (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹⁷ Wahl-Jorgensen et al. *BBC Breadth of Opinion Review Content Analysis*. Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. Available at: https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/content_analysis.pdf (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

showed, '[t]he BBC tends to reproduce a Conservative, Eurosceptic, pro-business version of the world, not a left-wing, anti-business agenda'.¹⁸

His claim that 'Conservatives get more air time than Labour' should be scrutinised. Firstly, air-time is not necessarily the same thing as regurgitation of a political viewpoint. That a politician is on the news is not something necessarily to be welcomed; nor is a grilling on the BBC by someone like Emily Maitlis something to be savoured or guaranteed good publicity – as Prince Andrew would surely testify. Secondly, there are issues with the data he cites as well as interpretation. Berry assumes that a greater ratio of Conservatives to Labour in 2012 when speaking on issues of immigration, the EU and religion, than that of Labour to Conservative in 2007, implies bias on the part of the BBC (n.b. we expect the party in power to feature more often – the question is comparability of ratios). This ignores the possibility that these were subjects Labour was less keen to talk about. How would the data compare on questions such as the NHS or public spending?

Berry also cites data across all topics (that is, beyond immigration, religion, and the EU) to say that Conservative politicians 'were featured more than 50 per cent more often than Labour ones (24 vs 15) across the two time periods on the BBC News at Six'. As he says, 'the evidence is clear that the BBC does not lean to the left, it actually provides more space for Conservative voices'. What this analysis omits is that if you break down the data between the two sample periods covered, you get a ratio of Labour appearing four times more often than Conservatives in 2007 (eight versus two), and Conservatives appearing 3.14 times more often than Labour in 2012 (22 versus seven) – roughly the same. Moreover, those data show across both samples, BBC News at Six had roughly the same ratio of Conservatives to Labour as Channel 4 News (1.6 to one and 1.4 to one), which few would accuse of right-wing bias.¹⁹ It seems more likely that whatever was going on in politics at the times surveyed was shaping the news agenda rather than BBC editors.

In any case, the Prebble Review and the Cardiff study was further taken to task by a group monitoring public service broadcast programmes, Newswatch, in a critique published by Civitas. It questioned the independence of the research, pointing out that sampling biases meant:

*'[I]n the case of the Today programme, 20 of the 21 pro-EU speakers during Cardiff's 2012 survey were either omitted or ignored, giving a false impression of pro-EU voices being under-represented.'*²⁰

Academics from Cardiff responded to the Newswatch critique, pointing out some factual errors apparently made. The Cardiff academics wrote that the 'affair serves as a cautionary tale illustrating how researchers can be the target of spurious attacks when trying to do

¹⁸ Berry, M. (2013) *Hard Evidence: how biased is the BBC?* Available at: <https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-how-biased-is-the-bbc-17028> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

¹⁹ Wahl-Jorgensen et al. *BBC Breadth of Opinion Review Content Analysis*. Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. Available at: https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/content_analysis.pdf (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²⁰ Keighley, D. and Jubb, A. (2014) *Impartiality at the BBC? An investigation into the background and claims of Stuart Prebble's 'Independent Assessment for the BBC Trust'*, Civitas. Available at: <https://www.civitas.org.uk/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

conduct [sic] mainstream social science.’ But research on the issue of impartiality has not ended there.

Newswatch instead claims the BBC has shown a consistent bias in favour of the European Union. In a separate report for Civitas (2018), it compiled the findings from almost two decades of monitoring of BBC output. It found out of 4,275 guests talking about the European Union between 2005 and 2015 on Radio 4’s *Today* programme, just 132 (3.2 per cent) were supporters of withdrawal, despite this being the choice of the electorate in 2016.

Academics Justin Lewis and Stephen Cushion, also of Cardiff University, further contend that while the broadcast coverage of the EU referendum was ‘fairly scrupulous’ in achieving a balance between both sides of the argument, there were further problems in that because the campaigns were dominated by conservatives such as Cameron and Johnson *et al.* it meant that a left-wing case for remaining in the EU was not heard. Also, that ‘truthful and informative reporting was drowned out in the political tit-for-tat between the two campaigns.’ This resulted in the ‘palpably misleading claims’, for example the infamous claim from the Leave Campaign that £350 million per week was being sent to the EU each week, assigned the same status as the ‘consensus view from most economists that withdrawal from the EU was likely to have a negative impact on the UK economy.’²¹

Firstly, we should not be surprised that the BBC gave equal air time, since it is obligated to do so during elections or referendums. Secondly, the £350 million claim *was* demolished in a BBC article which said, ‘We’ve said it before and we’ll say it again – the UK does not send £350m a week to Brussels.’²² To its credit, it also published a similar critique of the Remain Campaign’s equally dubious claim that leaving the EU would cost each family £4,300 per year.²³ It can be added that perhaps Lewis and Cushion are placing too much faith in the consensus view of economists. Finally, a left-wing view for *leaving* the European Union has also seldom been heard. Newswatch found that throughout 274 hours of monitored BBC coverage of the EU between 2002 and 2017, just 14 left-wing speakers advocated leaving the EU (0.2 per cent), contributing 12 minutes in sum.²⁴

Ideas of the New Left at play

It would be better to think of the biases that pervade the BBC not in terms of traditional left and right, but those of the New Left which pivoted from class and capitalism as its objects of critique to things like race, sexuality and gender, colonialism and environmentalism. The examples given in the next chapter, drawn from the BBC’s educational output, would seem to support this hypothesis. Here is a quote from a leaked recording of comments made by BBC Director General Tim Davie, as reported by *The Daily Telegraph* concerning bias in the BBC:

²¹ Lewis, J. and Cushion, S. (2017) *BBC ‘Brexit bias’ claims need to be based on hard evidence*. Available at:

<https://theconversation.com/bbc-brexit-bias-claims-need-to-be-based-on-hard-evidence-75003> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²² Reuben, A. (2016). *Reality Check: Would Brexit mean extra £350m a week for NHS?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36040060> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²³ Reuben, A. (2016) *Reality Check: Would Brexit cost your family £4,300?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36073201> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²⁴ Keighley, D. and Jubb, A. (2018). *The Brussels Broadcasting Corporation?* Civitas. Available at: <https://civitas.org.uk/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

‘There’s a whole load of waffle talked about, you know, the Left. It’s not largely a Left or Right thing at the moment, it’s social issues, it’s rural affairs, what you think about the countryside, what you think about climate change, what you think about diversity.’²⁵

This would seem to support the New Left hypothesis – although it should be added that this has developed much since the 1980s and might best be described as ‘radical progressivism’. This can be thought of as a heightened political sensitivity to questions of race, sex, sexuality, and history. It is a worldview that sees human beings as psychologically fragile and suffering from ‘trauma’. They are better understood as members of social groups, not individuals, who exist in ‘power relations’ of dominance and submission. The trauma of individuals stems from their groups’ oppression. Any claims to truth are little more than self-serving perspective and the accomplishments of Western Civilisation are actually impositions upon oppressed groups that served to keep them in their place.

Colloquially known as ‘woke’, associated ideas include ‘unconscious bias’, ‘anti-racism’, and ‘decolonisation of the curriculum’. At heart, this is inseparable from political activism, in that these ideas all call for the capture of public and private institutions so that they can be commanded to bring about a better world to achieve ‘social justice’. They demand regulation of individuals’ psychology by bureaucrats (for example, unconscious bias training) and the joining of a mass movement to achieve utopia. The influence of these ideas will be evidenced in the next chapter.

Factual and historical output, plus non-funny comedians

Critics will further argue that the BBC is wrapped up in matters that do not concern most people. Here is a quote from Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP:

‘People don’t actually think the BBC gives them what they want... People are switching off. They are fed up getting spoon-fed this very central London, wokeish, apologetic view of their country.’²⁶

The London-centric hypothesis is perhaps a misnomer, but certainly there is the perception held by many that the prejudices and concerns of the BBC are those most commonly found among affluent residents of places like Hampstead and Highgate. The BBC’s factual and entertainment programming have also come under criticism for apparent bias, with critics pointing to an unfair and damaging portrayal of British history, a soft but not always subtle proselytising of left-wing views, and a near-constant stream of anti-Brexit, anti-Tory invective dressed up as comedy.

The academic pressure group History Reclaimed has published a report (2022) that looked at bias in how the BBC relays British history in both documentaries, news, and light entertainment. Specifically, they took issue with the way the Irish and Bengal famines were

²⁵ Tominey, C. (2023) “‘Truly amazing what we’re pulling off’ in forcing people to pay BBC licence fee, says Tim Davie”, *The Telegraph*, 16 February. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/16/truly-amazing-what-pulling-forcing-people-pay-bbc-licence-fee/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²⁶ Ibid.

presented along with British involvement in the slave trade, among other things. As its authors say:

'Taken in isolation, each example might seem minor, but they all tend in one direction: the fostering of a negative view of British history, and especially of its relations with the non-European world from which British citizens of ethnic minority backgrounds and their ancestors originally came. We have found no examples in which recent BBC programmes might be accused of giving excessively favourable accounts of our history: of Britain's struggle against slavery, its promotion of economic development, its provision of law and security in trouble-torn regions, or its fostering of democratic institutions for independent colonies.

*'The examples we have highlighted have other common features. They give a voice only to one side of a disputed past, even presenting false history as uncontested fact. Furthermore, those presenting or being interviewed as experts generally have little or no expertise in the subjects on which they are making pronouncements, even though these are often complex and controversial matters.'*²⁷

The Campaign for Common Sense has conducted research into apparent bias in BBC comedy shows, judging by the publicly-expressed views of the comics that appear on them. Monitoring the BBC's comedy programmes throughout November 2020, it found that 74 per cent of slots were filled by comedians with 'publicly pronounced left-leaning, or anti-Brexit, or "woke" persuasions.' Out of 141 comedians booked, 70 per cent held such views – with just four slots allocated to two comics who were right-wing, pro-Brexit or 'anti-woke'.²⁸

Critics have pointed out that sometimes BBC comedy shows, panel shows in particular, seem like nothing more than a string of jibes at the Tories as well as Brexit. The apparent views of BBC comedians are well to the left of the British public, which backed leaving the European Union 52 per cent to 48, while around half voted for right-wing parties at the last general election.²⁹ While it is only right that comics cock a snook at political leaders, there is a line that can be crossed where you move into a form of political advocacy. Employing leftist comedians to constantly deride the elected government, on behalf of what is in effect a branch of the unelected state, risks undermining faith in our democracy.

There are some signs that the BBC is attempting to address the situation, with *The Daily Mail* recently reporting Radio 4 bosses have instructed writers that 'humour shouldn't just come from one political viewpoint' and to 'check the political assumptions underlying your idea.'³⁰ Much criticised shows like *The Mash Report* and *Mock the Week* have been cancelled. Concerning the former, the ex-BBC journalist Andrew Neil said it was 'self-satisfied, self-adulatory, unchallenged left-wing propaganda.' He has further added, 'When it comes to so-

²⁷ History Reclaimed (2022) *Can we trust the BBC with our history?* Available at: <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/can-we-trust-the-bbc-with-our-history/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²⁸ Campaign for Common Sense (2020) *A Barrel of Laughs: the BBC, diversity, & comedy*. Available at: <https://campaigncommonsense.com/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

²⁹ Carl, N. *Lackademia: Why do academics lean left?* Adam Smith Institute. Available at: <https://www.adamsmith.org/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³⁰ Revoir, P. (2023) 'Humour shouldn't just come from one political viewpoint': Radio 4 comedy bosses ordered to tackle shows' Left-wing bias', *Daily Mail*, 12 February. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11742907/Radio-4-comedy-bosses-ordered-tackle-shows-Left-wing-bias.html> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

called comedy, the BBC has long given up on balance, on radio and TV. Nobody seems to care.³¹ Perhaps the most damning criticism is that these programmes are simply not funny, and do not hold a candle to past and much-loved shows such as *Blackadder*, *The Two Ronnies*, and *Last of the Summer Wine*.

The Campaign for Common Sense has also conducted similar research looking at the cultural assumptions that underwrite the BBC's entertainment offering. Throughout 2022, it monitored over 60 hours of BBC shows, including *The Capture*, *Vigil*, and *Sherwood*. None of the content viewed was sympathetic towards 'small-c conservative or right-wing views.' It gave 40 per cent of the dramas a four- or five-star bias rating, based on its own metric. Where bias was present, it 'invariably skewed towards the left'. For example, in *Vigil*, one character tells the viewer:

'[W]e have no viable [nuclear] deterrent if it can be infiltrated by a foreign power. There's no way our government can claim that these weapons are safe and secure. It's time to get the nukes out of Scotland'.

It is notable that an anti-nuclear weapons activist and SNP councillor acted as consultant on this show.³²

Shows like *Doctor Who* have also been accused of laying it on with a trowel concerning 'LGBT' issues, including depicting far-away planets where men give birth.³³ Fans of *Red Dwarf* will know this used to be a joke on the BBC. Meanwhile *Eastenders* has been criticised when long-standing character Sharon Watts threw a drink in a rival's face, saying 'we've had Brexit and Covid, we don't need you here.'³⁴ Perhaps this is the greatest sign of BBC detachment in that the real-life Sharon Wattses of this world likely voted to leave the European Union and do not view this as a catastrophe in quite the same way as certain BBC scriptwriters.

Ex-BBC hacks sounding off

We might also add the voices of past-BBC employees. Here is John Humphrys writing after retiring from hosting the *Today* programme:

'The Brexit crisis had exposed a fundamental flaw in the culture of the BBC. Its bosses, almost to a man and woman, could simply not grasp how anyone could have put a cross in the Leave box on the referendum ballot paper. I'm not sure the BBC as a whole ever quite had a real grasp of what was going on in Europe or of what people in this country thought about it...'

³¹ Singh, A. (2021) 'BBC cancels The Mash Report, show criticised for 'Left-wing bias'', *The Telegraph*, 11 March. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/11/bbc-cancels-mash-report-show-became-focus-perceived-left-wing/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³² Campaign Common Sense (2023) *Partial to Some Performative Drama: The BBC and Bias* Available at: <https://campaigncommonsense.com/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³³ Hardwick, J. (2018) 'Doctor Who fans left divided over pregnant man storyline: 'They've lost the plot'', *Daily Star*, 4 November. Available at: <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/tv/doctor-who-tonight-pregnant-man-16815484> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³⁴ *Daily Mail*, 'Video: When Walford went WOKE: As EastEnders viewers tire of 'virtue signalling' storylines... how climate change, Brexit and teen pregnancies led to questions over the show's future'. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-2845665/Video-Brexit-likened-Covid-Sharon-Watts-EastEnders-programme.html> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

Perhaps most importantly for what is presented in this report, Humphrys outlined the forms of institutional capture that take place within the BBC:

'It worries me that the nation has become susceptible to certain pressure groups in a way that we should all find disturbing. Academics call it "policy capture." It means influencing policy — even dictating it — through fear rather than argument. They destroy those who disagree with them, often through personal attacks on their character or by sheer intimidation.

*'A relatively recent phenomenon in the BBC is the growth of groups of employees who conflate and, perhaps, confuse their own interests with those of the wider world. The logic seems to be that if they feel strongly about a given issue, the BBC should not only listen to them but modify its output to reflect their own world view. A generation ago, they might have been listened to politely and then shown the door. Today, they don't need to talk to their bosses: they use Twitter.'*³⁵

Humphrys noted his concern when the BBC created the post of 'LGBT correspondent' and its appointee reportedly said, 'I'm looking forward to being the mouthpiece for some marginalised groups'.³⁶ The man in question did not last long in the role (around two years, six months)³⁷ and authored a particularly contentious piece on Keira Bell and her legal action against the NHS Tavistock clinic.³⁸ The BBC upheld a complaint against the piece, ruling:

'...the article should have done more to reflect the arguments of those who have legitimate reservations about the use of puberty blockers and upheld this element of the complaint'

And that 'that the repeated references to suicide went beyond what was editorially justified in the context'.³⁹

Another ex-BBC journalist who has criticised it for bias is Andrew Marr, for whom it is:

*'... a publicly-funded urban organisation with an abnormally large proportion of younger people, of people in ethnic minorities and almost certainly of gay people, compared with the population at large [that] creates an innate liberal bias inside the BBC.'*⁴⁰

Now consider this from Jeff Randall of *The Daily Telegraph* and former BBC Business Editor,

³⁵ Greenhill, S. (2019) 'Broadcaster John Humphrys savages bias at the BBC as he accuses the 'Kremlin' style corporation of being out of touch', *Daily Mail*, 20 September. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7487661/Broadcaster-John-Humphrys-lifts-lid-institutional-liberal-bias-BBC.html> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ben Hunte LinkedIn profile: www.linkedin.com/in/benhunte/ (Accessed: 21 July 2023)

³⁸ BBC, *Puberty blockers: Parents' warning as ruling challenged*, *bbc.co.uk*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/ecu/puberty-blockers-parents-warning-as-ruling-challenged-bbccouk> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Douglas, T. (2007) *Does the BBC have a bias problem?* Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6764779.stm> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

*'It's a bit like walking into a Sunday meeting of the Flat Earth Society. As they discuss great issues of the day, they discuss them from the point of view that the earth is flat. If someone says, "No, no, no, the earth is round!", they think this person is an extremist. That's what it's like for someone with my right-of-centre views working inside the BBC.'*⁴¹

Here is former-BBC newsreader Peter Sissons:

'In my view, 'bias' is too blunt a word to describe the subtleties of the pervading culture. The better word is a 'mindset.' At the core of the BBC, in its very DNA, is a way of thinking that is firmly of the Left...

'Whatever the United Nations is associated with is good – it is heresy to question any of its activities. The EU is also a good thing, but not quite as good as the UN. Soaking the rich is good, despite well-founded economic arguments that the more you tax, the less you get. And Government spending is a good thing, although most BBC people prefer to call it investment, in line with New Labour's terminology.

'All green and environmental groups are very good things. Al Gore is a saint. George Bush was a bad thing, and thick into the bargain. Obama was not just the Democratic Party's candidate for the White House, he was the BBC's. Blair was good, Brown bad, but the BBC has now lost interest in both.

*'Trade unions are mostly good things, especially when they are fighting BBC managers. Quangos are also mostly good, and the reports they produce are usually handled uncritically. The Royal Family is a bore. Islam must not be offended at any price, although Christians are fair game because they do nothing about it if they are offended.'*⁴²

He points out that unlike ITN, the BBC is susceptible to political pressure 'particularly if there is a licence fee settlement in the offing.'⁴³ This is an important point in that there will always be this tension between BBC and government that you will not encounter with the private sector. It attempts to expose and police those who control the purse strings, who will inevitably resent coverage that strays over into political opposition. There is a fine line between that and holding the government to account.

And now consider this from Rod Liddle, formally editor of the BBC's *Today* programme:

'It [the BBC] is incalculably liberal lefty, I mean to an incalculable degree. I don't think it's hard left-wing, these are affluent middle-class people who want to keep their incomes. When questions of taxation come up, they often become somewhat less left-wing. But it's left-wing particularly on "culture wars" stuff, on immigration, on most

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sissons, P. (2011) 'Left-wing bias? It's written through the BBC's very DNA, says Peter Sissons', *Daily Mail*, 22 January. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1349506/Left-wing-bias-Its-written-BBCs-DNA-says-Peter-Sissons.html> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁴³ Ibid.

*foreign affairs but particularly Israel and it's been like that for decades. It was pretty much like that when I was there.'*⁴⁴

Finally, Robin Aitken:

'We all know the cliched critique of the BBC: a nest of Lefties promoting a progressive agenda and political correctness. Depressingly, that cliché is uncomfortably close to the truth: the BBC is biased, and it is a bias that seriously distorts public debate. In the past 30 years, "Auntie" has transformed from the staid upholder of the status quo to a champion of progressive causes. In the process, the ideal at the heart of the corporation – that it should be fair-minded and non-partisan – has all but disappeared...

*'But by the time I was appointed BBC Scotland's business and economics correspondent in 1981, I had doubts. The BBC in Scotland was deeply antagonistic towards the Conservative Government; our narrative was one of devastating industrial decline and Government heartlessness. I had endless arguments with colleagues. On one occasion, a producer got so cross with me for defending Mrs Thatcher that we came close to blows.'*⁴⁵

Note that all these people hold a range of political sympathies (left, right, centre), and none of them allege a conservative bias, although that might have been true of the BBC at one point, long ago. Generally, they are speaking not of support for the traditional left as characterising BBC bias, but a set of ideas that favours certain political positions almost by default. Incidentally, when Liddle himself was editor of the *Today* programme, he faced accusations of left-wing bias.⁴⁶

There is also a degree of unwarranted moaning over BBC impartiality, with Andrew Marr saying recently, having departed the BBC:

*'You ought to be able to say on the BBC, "The prime minister said this to the House of Commons. We've checked it, and it's not true." But it would have been very, very controversial.'*⁴⁷

There is nothing to prevent this with *BBC Reality Check* routinely checking the claims of politicians including Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak.⁴⁸ Marr further said in an interview with *The Radio Times*:

⁴⁴ *The Spectator* (2022) 'Rod Liddle: Why does the BBC care what Twitter thinks? | SpectatorTV'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwkWwmR42Qo> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁴⁵ Aitken, R. (2012) 'What is the loneliest job in Britain? Being a Tory at the BBC', *Evening Standard*, 13 April. Available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/what-is-the-loneliest-job-in-britain-being-a-tory-at-the-bbc-7245499.html> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁴⁶ Day, J. (2002) 'Telegraph accuses Liddle of political bias', *The Guardian*, 26 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/sep/26/pressandpublishing.politicsandthemedia> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁴⁷ Quoted in Rob Burley, *Why is this lying bastard lying to me?* (2023).

⁴⁸ BBC News, *BBC Verify*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/reality_check (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

*'I'm thinking of [Johnson's] claim during the EU referendum that Turkey was about to join the EU – I wish I'd had the chance to call those out more clearly. And I can now.'*⁴⁹

Much was made of Marr having 'got his voice back' when he joined LBC Radio, but there was really nothing to prevent him challenging such claims while at the BBC. For example, last year, the BBC published an article online headlined 'Penny Mordaunt's false claim about Turkey', while she was running to be Prime Minister and which harked back to the 2016 referendum.⁵⁰

A conflict for the ages

There is an impression of an internal conflict going on within the BBC that is generational. Its younger staff are more likely to embrace things like Black Lives Matter and see the roles of journalist and activist as indistinguishable. Sarah Sands, who is a former editor of the *Today* programme, wrote that 'the BBC is not just a broadcaster but also an attentive employer in the age of the employee activist.' This ends up with 'a sense of entitlement among younger employees: they expect to have their view of the world on air.'⁵¹ Or consider this from former BBC Director of Global News and Cardiff academic, Richard Sambrook, when giving evidence to a House of Lords committee:

'The generational point... is one of the challenges at the moment. If I talk to students about impartiality and I say that a large part of impartiality is fairness, they might respond by saying that fairness is about social justice. Then I have to backtrack and say that that is not just what it is about and I try to reframe the argument.'

*'It comes to the identity politics point... They have a different concept of what is right. We are in a culture of calling things out and trying to find truth. A lot of this is fed by trying to find things that they can rely upon in an argumentative environment where things do not seem as solid as they might have done in the past. We have a generation that does not see it in quite the same way as previous generations might have done. Having said that, when you talk to them and take them through it and they realise what impartiality is – a set of disciplines to help them and support them to do strong journalism – they buy into it. But it takes quite a lot to talk them through it and get them to understand that impartiality is not about bland journalism. It is about supporting stronger journalism.'*⁵²

⁴⁹ *The Radio Times*, 27 May to 2 June 2023.

⁵⁰ BBC Verify (2022) Penny Mordaunt's false Brexit claim about Turkey. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/62185058> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁵¹ Gant, J. (2020) 'Former Today programme editor slams 'entitled' young BBC staff who 'expect to have their view of the world on air' after new director-general said 'bias has no place' at the broadcaster', *Daily Mail*, 5 September. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8699981/Ex-Today-programme-editor-slams-entitled-young-BBC-staff-expect-view-air.html> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁵² House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (2021) *Corrected oral evidence: BBC impartiality and editorial standards*. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/3201/pdf/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

Sambrook continued:

*'The same editorial standards need to apply on social media as apply everywhere else. That is very difficult, because the social media environment is not particularly conducive to traditional public service journalism. It is strident, argumentative, often abusive, has a very casual tone. There is rising activism, more campaigning. None of these things is very conducive to classic BBC journalism. One of the problems, I think, is that some staff are being lured in by that and are saying, "We must be part of this tide this swim, and show that we are relevant to all these debates and things that are going on".'*⁵³

If we are talking about a cultural divide based on generations within the BBC, and this is likely true given what we know about generational divisions politically with regard to things like free speech and the youth embracement of the culture of hyper-sensitivity, then it is likely we will be seeing the BBC's straying into activism most pronounced in its online content, since this is where the young will be most *au fait*.

Like most major employers, the BBC has staff affinity networks that can be questioned for trying to exert influence on its editorial line. An article written for *Vice* details some of the comments made in a meeting of the BBC's Pride Network – an internal affinity group for gay and transgender staff. Bones of contention included a BBC podcast on the LGBT campaigning charity Stonewall, its decision to leave Stonewall's controversial diversity scheme, and an article on the BBC website about lesbians who felt pressured to have sex with men who claimed to be transgender. The meeting was recorded and leaked to a journalist at *Vice*, formerly the BBC's LGBT correspondent, discussed above. Here are some quotations from the meeting:

'Organisations like the BBC do not change. Right now, if you are trans and working there, you are not safe.'

'It is incredibly difficult to challenge BBC editors on transphobic content. Speaking up to senior members of staff, who may or may not one day be the person who decides whether you get a job, can be challenging. It feels like you're putting your job on the line by even attending some of these conversations.'

'I worked for the BBC most of my life – I've loved this place and stayed because I really believe in its public service mission. But over the past year we've said that trans women are predators, lesbians are transphobic, that Stonewall is bad, and that the rise in homophobic hate crime isn't newsworthy. To appease a certain audience we're trying to split apart the LGBT community, and its trans people who will pay the price on the streets. Not in my name.'

⁵³ Ibid.

'I've had to immerse myself in the hate speech, and read it, analyse it, just so I can rebut it. That's painful work to do when it's about your own identity. This isn't just a trans fight – this is getting the BBC to be trustworthy.'

'We need to, as a group, come to this meeting with Tim Davie with a clear idea of what we want in mind.'

These quotations demonstrate the pressure, often highly emotive, from within to conform to a particular point of view on a contentious matter. Threats to quit were made along with allegations of 'transphobia' because the BBC was pursuing content that was disagreed with.⁵⁴

When it comes to 'LGBT issues', the BBC will produce coverage that either blurs the lines with advocacy or is prepared to assume the truth of the LGBT position, often the radical version of it. Consider a film made at the time of the Muslim protests over the 'No Outsiders' programme at Birmingham schools. This was a series of books that were felt by parents to be promoting values at odds with their religion. The film features interviews with gay Muslims who, as well as recounting their difficulties, speak up in favour of 'No Outsiders,' only there is no exploration of the conservative religious viewpoint.⁵⁵

Or consider an article published on the BBC website, headlined 'Italy leaves children of same-sex parents in limbo' by Davide Ghiglione. The story is that the mayor of Milan had been ordered by Italy's 'far-right' government to stop registering same-sex couples as parents. As the article puts it:

'...the mayor took a progressive stance and allowed children born to parents of the same gender to be acknowledged in the absence of clear national legislation.'

Many will be confused by this – what is meant by children being born to parents of the same gender and how this is possible? Numerous individuals are interviewed to condemn the decision, and in any case, buried within the text is the admission that the Italian government was responding to a ruling from Italy's preeminent Court of Cassation, meaning there was no 'order' as such.

Just two perfunctory quotes are allocated to government minister Matteo Salvini, one simply repeating what was said in a tweet. No sympathetic figures from the Catholic church are interviewed or other conservative voices, to give anything beyond a superficial take. Due impartiality here means a few words of quotation and no exploration of the religious conservative voice on such matters. As the academic David McGrogan argued on *The Daily Sceptic* website, we are left with the impression just one side cares about children, yet the Italian government is, in his view, not against homosexuality but rather 'the commodification

⁵⁴ Hunte, B. (2021) *LGBTQ Employees Are Quitting the BBC Because They Say It's Transphobic*. Available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7nv97/lgbtq-employees-are-quitting-the-bbc-because-they-say-its-transphobic> (Accessed: 26 July 2023).

⁵⁵ BBC News (2019) *School LGBT teaching row: Gay, Muslim and Parkfield*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-47817950> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

of every facet of human life, including even childbirth and babies themselves'. You may disagree with the Italian government, but certainly there is a moral viewpoint here worthy of greater exploration by a public service broadcaster.⁵⁶

Bias on social media

Perhaps the most-heated flashpoints in the debate on BBC political bias centre around its stars expressing or endorsing political positions on social media. On 7 March of this year (2023) the BBC football presenter Gary Lineker retweeted a Home Office video of the Home Secretary Suella Braverman talking about her policy to end illegal immigration via small boats. Lineker wrote, 'Good heavens, this is beyond awful.' Then in response to an accusation he was 'out of order,' he added:

*'There is no huge influx. We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries. This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s, and I'm out of order?'*⁵⁷

This resulted in his suspension from presenting *Match of the Day*, prompting a strike led by pundits Ian Wright and Alan Shearer. This was not Lineker's first rebuke, having been found to have breached impartiality rules in 2022, when he asked on Twitter if the Conservative Party would 'hand back their donations from Russian donors?'⁵⁸ A truncated version of the football highlights without commentators or punditry was broadcast, along with national radio coverage being replaced by pre-recorded material. Ultimately the strike brought about a cave-in, with BBC director general Tim Davie promising an independent review of BBC social media guidelines in return for Lineker and his colleagues returning to fulfilling their obligations to present football coverage.⁵⁹

Since then, a convenient fiction has set in that the BBC's social media guidelines are vague. For instance, Lineker's agent Jon Holmes wrote in the *New Statesman*, 'BBC guidelines on social media use for staff and freelancers are – let us say – a bit vague, and Gary is self-employed.'⁶⁰ Whatever vagueness there is, none of it is sufficient to let Lineker off the hook. The guidelines introduced in October 2022 state:

'There are also others who are not journalists or involved in factual programming who nevertheless have an additional responsibility to the BBC because of their profile

⁵⁶ McGrogan, D. (2023) 'The Gary Lineker 'Crisis' is a Distraction From the Real Problem with the BBC', 22 March, *Daily Sceptic*. Available at: <https://dailysceptic.org/2023/03/22/the-gary-lineker-crisis-is-a-distraction-from-the-real-problem-with-the-bbc/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁵⁷ Lineker, G. (2023) [Twitter]. 7 March. Available at: <https://twitter.com/GaryLineker/status/1633111662352891908?s=20> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

⁵⁸ BBC News (2023) *Gary Lineker tweet broke impartiality rules, says BBC complaints unit*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-63248314> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁵⁹ Mackintosh, T. and Rhoden-Paul, A. (2023) *Gary Lineker to return to Match of the Day as BBC's Tim Davie denies climbdown*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64936917> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁶⁰ Holmes, J. (2023) 'Gary Lineker's tweet, the BBC's panic, and why I was left to "sort it out"', *The New Statesman*, 15 March. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/diary/2023/03/jon-holmes-gary-lineker-tweet-bbc-panic> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

on the BBC. We expect these individuals to avoid taking sides on party political issues or political controversies and to take care when addressing public policy matters.’⁶¹

Clearly, this applies to Lineker, who has taken a side as well as made absurd and inflammatory comparisons to Nazi Germany that will alienate many, particularly Jews, for whom such comments may serve to diminish the severity of their historic persecution. The vagueness comes in in the section headed ‘Rules and expectations of social media use for all colleagues (employees, contractors and freelancers)’, where there is no mention of avoiding taking sides on party political issues or controversies and perhaps even the tacit permission to do so. The rules are:

1. ‘Always behave professionally, treating others with respect and courtesy at all times: follow the BBC’s Values.
2. ‘Don’t bring the BBC into disrepute.
3. ‘If your work requires you to maintain your impartiality, don’t express a personal opinion on matters of public policy, politics, or ‘controversial subjects’.
4. ‘Don’t criticise your colleagues in public. Respect the privacy of the workplace and the confidentiality of internal announcements.’

Since Lineker’s work in presenting sports does not require political impartiality, or even football impartiality for that matter since everyone knows he supports Leicester City, under Rule 3, he could claim his tweets were within the rules. However, it is also arguable that he broke Rules 1 and 2, through treating Suella Braverman with great discourtesy through apparently comparing her policy to those deployed by Nazi Germany, and by doing so bringing the BBC into obvious disrepute. Had he merely stated his disagreement with the policy, he might have had a case.

Supporters of Lineker point to double standards, in that other BBC employees were let off, including right-wing ones such as Andrew Neil and Alan Sugar.⁶² The problem with this argument is that the names mentioned are invariably occasional presenters who, according to the rules, ‘would not be required to apply the full requirements of the Editorial Guidelines to their social media use’. Moreover, ‘actors, dramatists, comedians, musicians and pundits who work for the BBC are not subject to the requirements of impartiality on social media.’ Whatever Neil had done to offend, he has left the BBC and his time there only briefly overlapped with the BBC’s social media guidelines as they relate to freelancers.⁶³

⁶¹ BBC, *Guidance: Individual Use of Social Media*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/individual-use-of-social-media> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁶² Tapper, J. (2023) ‘Gary Lineker was singled out from a long list of BBC stars who express political views’, *The Guardian*, 11 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/mar/11/gary-lineker-was-singled-out-from-a-long-list-of-bbc-stars-who-express-political-views> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁶³ *The Andrew Neil Show* was cancelled in January 2020, while the most recent guidelines were introduced in October 2020.

The only defence for Lineker will be any exemption in his contract with the BBC, since the rules state:

‘...the extent to which a non-staff member, contributor or presenter is required to comply with the Editorial Guidelines [on social media use] will be set out in the BBC’s contractual relationship with them.’

Lineker’s agent has claimed he ‘had a special agreement with Tim Davie... to tweet about these issues.’⁶⁴ Ultimately, this is where the rules breakdown since they cannot survive under the impression there is a smorgasbord of rules depending on the presenter in question. A review is thus welcome. In any case, an agreement to tweet about immigration does not obviate Lineker’s obligation to conduct himself well and avoid bringing the BBC into disrepute. Moreover, there remains the problem of what to do about well-paid pundits who go on strike in a way that would only serve to subvert an internal BBC disciplinary matter. Who rules – Tim Davie or Ian Wright?

As things stand, there is a hierarchy whereby news and current affairs presenters must observe strict impartiality online, while other presenters must in essence conduct themselves well while enjoying more freedom to write about what they care about. These apply to freelancers as much as anyone. Occasional presenters or pundits, as well as creative talent, are largely exempt. While we might be sympathetic to Lineker in that no one seriously expects him not to have an opinion because he presents football, on which his political views have no bearing, there is still one often-overlooked problem.

Every time he appears on television courtesy of the BBC, his profile is enhanced and his social media following is potentially increased. He can then use his considerable following to sway political opinion. Lineker currently has around 8.9 million followers on Twitter, making him a significant player.⁶⁵ He further promotes political content there, including podcasts his company produces. The question that the BBC must address, in addition to ironing out whatever inconsistencies there are in its policy (which are insufficient to let Lineker off the hook), is what to do about this problem of the licence fee payer subsidising presenters with a political clout they can then use to their own ends. Impartiality includes being impartial to Gary Lineker as much as the modest and reasonable expectations it imposes on him. An investigation by *The Daily Telegraph* has further identified other freelancers writing offensive tweets attacking the Tories, including ‘F*** the Tories and their culture war.’⁶⁶ This is something that is going to run and run, with the BBC funding a coterie of Twitter activists who regard it as their right to sound off, flouting the rules set upon them.

⁶⁴ Holmes, J. (2023) ‘Gary Lineker’s tweet, the BBC’s panic, and why I was left to “sort it out”’, *The New Statesman*, 15 March. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/diary/2023/03/jon-holmes-gary-lineker-tweet-bbc-panic> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁶⁵ Linker, G. [Twitter]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/garylineker> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁶⁶ Warrington, J (2023) ‘BBC freelancers post anti-Tory tweets as broadcaster embarks on social media review’, *The Telegraph*, 11 April. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/04/11/bbc-social-media-review-anti-tory-tweets/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Government co-option during times of crisis

The BBC has a tradition of seeing lines crossed during national crises. The General Strike in 1926 saw the BBC compromising its reporting, while during World War II it was understandably subject to censorship as well as broadcasting coded messages to resistance fighters on the continent.⁶⁷ Its role in the Covid-19 pandemic is now coming under scrutiny. An investigation by *The Daily Telegraph* alleged:

*‘during the pandemic the BBC morphed from a national broadcaster founded on impartiality into a state broadcaster that stifled those challenging the authoritarian response to Covid’.*⁶⁸

Anonymous BBC sources are reported by *The Telegraph* to say:

‘It was the matter of the greatest importance in our lifetime but there was no debate about it... We have to put our integrity and impartiality first and foremost and that did not happen. People were suggesting eminently qualified experts as alternative voices, but in my experience not one of them was put on air.’

*‘Downing Street pursued its lockdown strategy with a reckless disregard for the mental health of the public, lacing its messaging with fear and guilt to ensure broad compliance. This approach should have sounded alarm bells for every freedom-loving journalist in the BBC; instead, many of my colleagues were cowed. The apocalyptic atmosphere in the newsroom was fuelled by new in-house health and safety rules designed to ‘stop the spread’, many of which were absurd and the sort of box-ticking theatre the BBC is more than adept at.’*⁶⁹

They spoke of being ‘openly mocked’ and a ‘climate of fear’. This is in addition to the BBC’s avoidance of the term ‘lockdown’, in line with government preferences.⁷⁰ Another source told *The Telegraph* this was not a matter of conspiracy but a ‘combination of groupthink with noble cause censorship’, particularly as most BBC staff are drawn from the middle-class, for whom lockdowns were more tolerable. Professor Carl Heneghan, who is a medical scientist, alleged he went from being invited onto BBC programmes to explain the pandemic only to be ‘ghosted’ as his criticisms of the lockdown developed. He said:

*‘I was told by some of the people at the BBC that it was supporting lockdowns and editorially it was not deviating from that line.’*⁷¹

⁶⁷ David Hendy, *The BBC: A People’s History* (2022)

⁶⁸ Rayner, G. (2023) ‘The BBC has a reputation as a truth-teller – but in Covid it did what the Government wanted’, *The Telegraph*, 10 June. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/06/10/bbc-state-broadcaster/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mason, R. and Elgot, J. (2023) ‘BBC came under No 10 pressure to avoid using ‘lockdown’ in early pandemic, leak shows’, *The Guardian*, 14 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/mar/14/bbc-editors-asked-journalists-to-avoid-using-lockdown-at-start-of-pandemic> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁷¹ *Daily Telegraph*, op.cit.

‘You’re fake news!’

A representative of the BBC also attended the government’s Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum, according to the same *Telegraph* investigation. This organisation was chaired by ministers or civil servants and was attended by officials, social media companies, academics and Ofcom. This was ‘initially set up to prevent untruths about the Covid vaccines being disseminated online’ but the group later discussed ‘whether the scope of harms should be confined just to the Covid-19 vaccine’. The Forum was scrapped after six months. For its own part, the BBC maintains ‘we featured a range of voices during the pandemic, including those sceptical of lockdowns, in line with our duty of due impartiality’.

‘Fake news’ is a term that deserves caution. On the one hand, it may refer to unfounded rumours and deliberate lies that are calculated to subvert trust and fuel division. On the other, political actors can use it as a term to deny credibility to their political opponents or critics in the media. Fake news is, however, nothing new – with the BBC playing a role in countering it during World War II (for example, Lord Haw Haw) with its strategy, according to the historian David Hendy, being to produce simply more truth.⁷²

Recently, the BBC has gone on the offensive with the launch of BBC Verify. This is a team of almost 60 journalists, that unifies existing teams including the World Service Disinformation Team and the Monitoring Disinformation Team. Prominent roles are offered to ‘Analysis Editor’ Ros Atkins and the BBC’s first ‘Disinformation Correspondent’ Marianna Spring. Its purpose is ‘transparency in action’, namely ‘fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analysing data and explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth’.⁷³ The problem is that Spring’s own output has been criticised for bias,⁷⁴ while critics allege the BBC dabbles in disinformation when it is to its own personal tastes.⁷⁵

But the wider problem is that there is a fine line between what are conspiracy theories and disinformation, and what are tomorrow’s acceptable hypotheses, for example the lab-leak theory concerning the origins of the Covid-19 virus. The worry is that the BBC will start to taint scepticism, that is at least worthwhile listening to, if only to assure the strength of the accepted position. Often though, ideas from the margins that are critical of state intervention, but eschew the barmier aspects of conspiracy theories, win out in the long run. A recent study estimated the number of lives saved by lockdowns to be in the thousands.⁷⁶ Contrast this with an earlier study based on modelled projections and reported in the BBC without any critical reservation or comment that put the numbers in the millions. As the

⁷² David Hendy, *op.cit.*

⁷³ BBC, *BBC News puts transparency at its heart with BBC Verify*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/bbc-news-transparency-bbc-verify> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁷⁴ Stock, K. (2023) *The BBC’s phoney war on disinformation*. Available at: <https://unherd.com/2023/03/the-bbcs-phoney-war-on-disinformation/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁷⁵ Myers, F. (2023) *The truth about the BBC’s war on ‘disinformation’*. Available at: <https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/05/23/the-truth-about-the-bbcs-war-on-disinformation/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁷⁶ Donnelly, L. (2023) ‘Lockdown benefits ‘a drop in the bucket compared to the costs’, landmark study finds’, *The Telegraph*, 4 June. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/06/04/first-lockdown-prevented-1700-deaths-landmark-study-finds/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

BBC's article makes clear, that research came from Imperial College and 'the same group that guided the UK's decision to go into lockdown'.⁷⁷

In any case, it is strange that for all the anxiety over the BBC's attempts to instil greater impartiality as really a government power grab, there might be the willingness to go along with government narratives over things like Covid-19. The idea of 'noble cause censorship' may very well explain this. Perhaps the BBC ethos of impartiality in practice can be summed up as fierce independence, unless, of course, it pertains to matters that affirm 'our values'. The trouble is, as scholars like David Goodhart and Jonathan Haidt have argued, values are not uniform across society. Those prevalent among the middle-class professions are not the same as those in demoralised post-industrial communities. The BBC is trying to understand the populism that seeks to attack it. With measures like BBC Verify, it might be said to be trying to fight it. But victory seems unlikely so long as through its own unwitting biases, the BBC continues to stoke it.

Impartiality in the age of populism

Last August (2022), the former-BBC journalist Emily Maitlis gave the McTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh TV Festival. There she outlined her thoughts on how journalism had to evolve in the face of political populists who so often were prepared to refuse journalists' claims of being disinterested reporters of the news. Dismissing them as 'fake news,' they charge journalists with being part of the same political cartel that masqueraded as political choice, while imposing on the electorate things they did not want nor had given their consent to. Needless to say, the charge could often be deployed to evade criticism from the same legacy media they sought to disparage. For Maitlis, the tactic of populism is to discredit establishment journalists in order to substitute their account with their own. As she said:

'Because the way populism works – on us as journalists – is to seek to somehow divide us from the public. To make us feel that we are not “of the people.” That those in power are the only ones that can understand “normal folk.” And that we – the media – are somehow getting in the way of that relationship between the people and their government.'

She talks of the concept of 'strategic bias', associated with the Cambridge academic Ayala Panievsky, which means that journalists become biased in granting ground and airtime to the populists who wish to discredit them. By kowtowing, in order 'to signal their balance and impartiality', they surrender their independence. Maitlis cites an example where the BBC's *Newsnight* invited a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn on to chastise the programme over an apparently inflammatory mock-up of Corbyn in front of the Kremlin. As she says, 'broadcasters' desire to be seen as neutral agents paradoxically enables populists to further spread the claim that we are not.' By pandering to populist critiques, 'journalists become complicit in the debilitation of their own status and authority' and their 'attempts to protect

⁷⁷ Gallagher, J. (2020) *Coronavirus: Lockdowns in Europe saved millions of lives*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52968523> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

their professional objective façade may contribute to the public's belief that they are in fact biased.'

There is something to be said for this argument, if the inclusion of populists in broadcast and print media amounts to obsequiousness. But Maitlis is blind to the possibility that the populists may have a point about the legacy media; that they have operated to exclude political opinions that the ballot box has found way of including in considerable numbers. This can be no more apparent than the burying of the Hunter Biden laptop story by a sinister alliance of internet companies, the media, and the American political establishment as well as security agencies. There are good reasons to distrust shows like *Newsnight* after its shabby treatment of Lord McAlpine as well as its shelving of its own investigation into Jimmy Saville. Moreover, by what right can the BBC exclude the voices of political populists who accuse it of propaganda and protection of the political establishment, when it is obliged by charter to reflect the views broadly of the country as a whole?

For Maitlis, however, the age of the populist calls for new measures from journalists. As she said:

'Let me take you this time to early 2016. The UK is beginning to debate the big questions around Britain's potential exit from the EU. It is complicated stuff: we are trying to offer our viewers both sides of a fiendishly difficult debate. And that intention was right. But we still got it wrong. We fell into what we might call "the Patrick Minford paradigm." In other words, it might take our producers five minutes to find 60 economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole voice who espoused it. But by the time we went on air we simply had one of each. We presented this unequal effort to our audience as balance. It wasn't.

'I would later learn the ungainly name for this myopic style of journalism – "both sideism," which talks to the way it reaches a superficial balance whilst obscuring a deeper truth.'

There is something disconcerting here that a former BBC journalist is prepared to discount a minority view among economists. Polling by *The Financial Times* in 2016 found that 30 per cent of economists predicted the UK's economic prospects would be either better or no worse on departure from the EU. That Maitlis is unaware of this substantial minority view is testament to her blind spot and that of her former employer, but that is not quite the point. The fact of numerical imbalance between two sides should not preclude the right of BBC viewers to hear both sides of the argument, nor did it mean those in the majority were by necessity correct with economics famed as the 'dismal science' with good reason. If the majority favours a particular viewpoint, then let the advocate for that viewpoint mention it in debate.

Maitlis advocated for journalists to be more forthright in criticising the obfuscations of populists, which is fair, only a more aggressive questioning of them will only fan the flames

further – why do others not get the same treatment, they will ask when the political establishment is just as prone to prevarication and evasiveness? The real worry about Maitlis’ speech is that she is advocating a new form of patrician journalism, whereby ‘impartiality’ comes to mean journalists deciding *ex ante* what is right and wrong before competing ideas can be heard by the public. Of course, there will always be an element of this in journalism. But it seems Maitlis wants its extension in order to exclude populists (who happen to criticise the media) because of their excesses, but at the expense of the public’s need to hear what they are saying as well as their legitimate claims to be heard on what is a public service broadcaster.

She describes a thought experiment laid down by her colleague Lewis Goodall:

‘Let’s imagine, he said, provocatively – the Supreme Court in America has overturned Brown v the Board of Education. That 1954 landmark ruling that would forever end racial segregation in public schools. What would the media do then? Would we just document it as settled fact? Would we call it racist? Would we offer up “both sides” and leave people to decide if they like it? Is it enough – in other words – to report things that might radically change the very fabric of our democracies and our societies as if they were merely a weather update? Leaving no discernible impact on the lives of those we address? It’s a big leap.’

She continued:

‘But I ask the question here, because it scares me. Because whilst we do not have to be campaigners, nor should we be complacent – complicit – onlookers.’

The response to Goodall would be to stress that his hypothetical is one *in extremis* and to ask how the attitude of journalists adding their own judgements on to stories would work where things are not quite as clear cut morally. In any case, let us say Brown was overturned; why would you not cover it objectively and interview those who supported the measure and those who were against it – does the public not have a right to know what thinking lay behind such a measure? Certainly, there would be no shortage of individuals willing to call it racist without the need for journalists to weigh in.

Maitlis’ line of thinking is that journalists should take sides where the truth is so obvious, but this will not function where things are ambiguous or matters of opinion, and where journalists are not quite as innocent as she would have you believe. If things are really so cut and dry, then the public will spot it. In any case, there is no need for such an approach when ideas and claims can be tested by evidence or refuted by others. For instance, if the economist Patrick Minford is wrong, a journalist can easily find another economist to contest what he says (as Maitlis has testified). To be impartial, to reserve judgement only to report, is not the same thing as being complicit – and that is a dangerous conflation.

‘Lying bastards’

The anxieties expressed by Maitlis are also evident in a recent book by the former BBC programme editor Rob Burley, *Why is this lying bastard lying to me?*, its provocative title taken from words often (mis)attributed to Jeremy Paxman. Burley specialised in preparing journalists for interviews with politicians. The book is in part a potted history of British political interviewing on television and part a memoir focusing on recent political shenanigans.

Its relevance here is that it gives a wider backdrop over the fears of BBC news staff, where there is often the faintest whiff of paranoia. The reason for this is perhaps due to the nature of the institution, where there are many faceless faces who intervene in decision-making that are often untraceable. This is revealed by Burley when he finds out, unbeknownst to him, he was not the only one from the BBC involved in negotiations with Boris Johnson’s team, over his interview with Andrew Neil in 2019 that never was. This was a significant row in that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn did an interview with Neil, lived to tell the tale but not much more. In the belief that Johnson would do the same, Johnson then pulled out, facing accusations of cowardice and trickery.

For Burley, the risk of bias lies in journalists becoming too close to politicians. As he writes:

‘For political journalists who report the news – whether in print, online or broadcast – relationships with the powerful and their people are vital. But this need for access is also the most serious impartiality risk: the risk that politicians in general, and the incumbent government, in particular, will have undue influence over the BBC’s political stories and how they cover them.’

‘Why does this happen? First, because journalists can become too close to those they cover and their staff, and second, because journalists want things that politicians can give, things like access to the prime minister and juicy stories.’

He notes that BBC executives will build relations with incumbent politicians to get stories ahead of rivals but that ‘fear political reprisals against the BBC from those who ultimately control the purse strings’. Such risks are very real and journalists are right to be wary of them. Ultimately, the BBC walks a fine line where it must bite the hand that feeds it, only not too much.

Burley’s chief worry pertains to recent changes in the structure of BBC News, under its *News 2020* plan. He criticises this for ‘a downgrading of individual programme editors and a huge centralisation of power in the hands of a small number of news executives’. It was a ‘cuts exercise that would bland out the content and reward the most adept empire builders’. As he wrote to Tim Davie, the implication of the plan was a risk to impartiality:

‘This means your most sensitive area – politics – is managed by one person. This is so unwise I can’t believe it’s made the cut. It means one person gets to decide how the

BBC does politics. No corrective, no editorial figure with any power to offer balance or a range of views. It exposes the BBC very badly.'

It is important to understand this wider backdrop within the BBC. For Burley, and he will not be alone, the 'perception that the BBC is too close to the government has only grown under [Davie's] leadership'. But Burley does not seem interested in the wider political and cultural bias that pervades the BBC, nor in why Davie might legitimately seek change while being capable of preserving editorial independence at the same time. Burley recounts discussing matters of allotments including potatoes, leeks, and onions with Jeremy Corbyn in 2017, post-interview with Andrew Marr, when 'a member of BBC staff – not one of the journalists' – bounds over for a 'selfie', soon to be followed by others. As he writes, 'Before long, a small crowd has gathered. A chant of 'Oh Jeremy Corbyn' goes up, and he [Corbyn] smiles, basking in it.'

This is told without comment. If these were not journalists, then who were they and why did they think this was acceptable? What is their role in the BBC and how can we expect such naked political preference for a dyed-in-the-wool socialist not to filter into important aspects of broadcasting and output where the scrutiny is not so intense?

Journalists and politicians will always have tortured relationships, they need yet threaten each other. But Burley, in the end, does not bother to answer his own question, why these 'lying bastards' lie. Politicians do tell porkies, sometimes outrageously, sometimes little white ones. Reading Burley's work, it is clear in the meticulous preparations for interviews that journalists do, that there is the leeway and *moral hazard* that journalists will look to steer politicians, that they set the agenda rather than report it. While politicians often reap contempt for their evasions, at times you can understand why they do so, in order to escape the political traps journalists set for them. Journalists may present themselves as noble gatherers of truth, only from the perspective of politicians who see nothing but attacks, you can at least empathise. They are only human.

Perceptions of bias and the BBC's class problem

According to a 2022 report from the BBC's independent regulator Ofcom, 66 per cent of adults felt the BBC provided news and information to help people understand what is happening at home and abroad. However, just 53 per cent were positive that the news it provides is impartial, with 23 per cent taking a negative view. The remainder were unsure. It further found that 'audiences in lower socio-economic groups (DE groups) are less likely than AB audiences to have positive views' of the BBC's news coverage as impartial. The same report noted that the BBC was making progress on its plan to restore impartiality, without providing evidence of actual improvements. Admittedly, this is difficult to quantify.⁷⁸

A more detailed analysis is presented in Ofcom's report from 2020. It found that 58 per cent rated the BBC news as impartial in 2019/20, down slightly from 61 per cent in 2017/18. It

⁷⁸ Ofcom (2022) *Ofcom Annual Report on the BBC 2021-22*. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

found similar declines for ITV, while other broadcasters saw rises. The BBC ranked worse than all other providers, although differences could be slight. For comparison, the scores in 2019/20 for ITV and Sky News, respectively, were 63 and 69 per cent.⁷⁹

BBC reach is lower among the working-class. The 2020 Ofcom report found the reach of BBC news resources among the DE socioeconomic class (semi-skilled, unskilled manual occupations as well as unemployed, according to the Social Grade classification)⁸⁰ had declined from 71 per cent two years prior to 63 per cent (defined as the share of individuals interacting with the BBC each week). At the same time, reach among the ABs (higher managerial and professional jobs) had held constant at 81 per cent. As the report found:

‘...for the past three years, people in the DE group have consistently given below-average scores for every aspect of the BBC’s news provision, while AB adults have consistently given above-average scores for every aspect.’

Forty-nine per cent of DEs held that the BBC provided news that is impartial, compared to 60 per cent of ABs.

According to the British Social Attitudes survey of 2019, 53 per cent of those in the white-collar ‘salaried’ jobs named the BBC News website as their most-frequented online news source, compared to 43 per cent of the working-class. However, usage was even lower among certain sections of the middle-class – for those in clerical jobs it was 37 per cent, while for the ‘petty bourgeois’, it was 34 per cent.⁸¹

The same Ofcom report presents analysis of how different groups of people perceive the BBC’s portrayal of them as both inclusive of people like them as well as authentic. Those with stronger perceived levels of representation and portrayals were the ABs, younger groups, as well as Asians. Those with weaker perceptions of representation as well as weaker portrayal were C2s (skilled manual occupations), DEs, elderly (75 and over) and disabled. Black people felt their representation was stronger but portrayal weaker, while gays felt they had weaker representation but stronger portrayal. The regions with the best perceived representation and strongest portrayal were London, the South East, and South, while those with the worst levels were the South West, West, and Scotland.⁸²

Analysis by the Reuters Institute has found that trust in the BBC is falling, from 75 per cent of adults in 2018 to 55 per cent in 2022. At the same time, the share distrusting the BBC has risen from 11 per cent to 26 per cent (with the remainder being unsure). Of those who distrust the BBC, they tend to be male, less interested in news, and have less education. Half are Tory voters, while two thirds voted to leave the European Union. It notes that both the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ UK Geographics (2014) *Social Grade A, B, C1, C2, D, E*. Available at: <https://ukgeographics.co.uk/blog/social-grade-a-b-c1-c2-d-e> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁸¹ NatCen (2019) British Social Attitudes 36. Available at: <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

⁸² Ibid.

left-wing *Guardian* and right-wing *Daily Mail* newspapers have seen declines in trust, but not on the same scale.

The Institute's research shows that the BBC audience tends to be left-of-centre politically. Nevertheless, it found the BBC to be one of the most trusted sources of news, with 55 per cent trusting it, compared to 55 per cent for ITV, 54 per cent for Channel 4, 48 per cent for *The Guardian*, 45 per cent for Sky News, 36 per cent for *The Daily Telegraph*, and just 12 per cent for *The Sun*. Trust was also high for the BBC among American audiences, and especially high among Indian audiences – at 71 per cent.⁸³ Reuters notes that BBC reach among the highly educated is 60 per cent, while for those with little education it is 34 per cent (and this will correlate heavily with social class). Such figures are not matched by other European public service broadcasters.⁸⁴

Separate polling carried out by BMG Research in 2018 found just 37 per cent of adults thought the BBC was impartial, with around a quarter being unsure. The remainder split fairly evenly into those who thought it had a right-wing bias and those who thought it left-wing. Compared to other channels, including ITV and Sky News, 40 per cent thought it had a bias, either left- or right-wing.

Younger people were less likely to perceive a bias – 20 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds compared to 50 per cent of those 65 and over. Among supporters of political parties, suspicion of the BBC was highest among UKIP voters, with 80 per cent believing it to be biased, with most of them seeing it as one in favour of the left. Forty-seven per cent of Conservative supporters perceived a bias, compared to 40 per cent of Labour supporters, both mostly seeing it as biased in favour of the other. Perceptions of the BBC as having a right-wing bias were most pronounced among SNP supporters – 47 per cent. Just 32 per cent of those who voted to leave in the EU referendum in 2016 thought the BBC was impartial, compared to 47 per cent of Remainers. Thirty-four per cent of leavers detected a left-wing bias.⁸⁵

The Reuters Institute has also undertaken some exploration of what is commonly understood as 'impartiality'. A separate report concluded that 'engaged' audiences still cared about impartiality and, on the whole, wanted:

'[J]ournalists to focus on facts, objectivity and fairness, and to steer clear of opinions and bias in reporting, leaving them to decide for themselves how they felt about the news.'

Such viewers recognise the risk in giving exposure to political extremists but are more concerned about censorship. However, most thought there were some topics where 'there

⁸³ Reuters Institute (2022) *Digital News Report 2022*. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁸⁴ Nielsen et al. (2020) *The BBC is under scrutiny. Here's what research tells about its role in the UK*. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/bbc-under-scrutiny-heres-what-research-tells-about-its-role-uk> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁸⁵ BMG (2018) *Is the BBC biased? BMG reveals public perceptions of broadcaster impartiality in the UK*. Available at: <https://www.bmgresearch.co.uk/is-the-bbc-biased-bmg-reveals-public-perceptions-of-broadcaster-impartiality-in-the-uk/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

were not always two sides or more to represent.’ Examples were science, natural disasters and ‘questions of social justice.’

The same research found that people were more concerned with social media as a source of bias as well as chat shows and podcasts. Young people tend to ‘have different expectations of impartiality, often looking for journalism that aligns with their values’, although mostly they want the same things as everyone else.⁸⁶ Reuters’ research notes generational differences, despite most wanting roughly the same thing from journalism. Fifty-seven per cent of those aged 55 and over think journalists should stick to reporting the news, compared to 34 per cent of those 18 to 24. Of the latter, almost half think journalists should express personal opinions, compared to 29 per cent of those aged 55 and over.⁸⁷

BBC action on bias

The BBC has tacitly admitted it has a problem with bias, by taking steps to improve on its impartiality. In October 2021, it published a ‘10-point plan impartiality plan’ coming off the back of critical reports, authored by Lord Dyson and Sir Nicholas Serota, that tackled the Martin Bashir scandal as well as examining governance and culture.⁸⁸ If there was no problem with bias, then there would obviously be no need for such action. The plan speaks of a ‘renewal of the BBC’s commitment to impartiality as its first strategic priority.’ Actions stipulated included: new guidance to ‘enhance understanding’ of Editorial Guidelines, ‘Safeguarding Impartiality training’, updated social media guidance, and a new public register of paid-for engagements’. The plan further committed the BBC to ‘challenge ourselves creatively to ensure we reflect a wide range of viewpoints.’⁸⁹ The plan says:

‘This presents an opportunity to address the issue of impartiality in its broadest sense, pushing the debate beyond traditional left/right divides and addressing the challenge of audiences who do not currently feel their lives, attitudes and opinions are adequately represented or portrayed on the BBC.’

As well as committing to monitoring its impartiality through data on uptake of its training and the number of complaints, the BBC also committed itself to ‘thematic reviews’ of its content, with the first being a review of the BBC’s coverage of UK public spending and taxation.⁹⁰ It should be noted that much of the impetus for this comes from the current Director General, Tim Davie, who in his introductory speech given in 2020 said:

‘But while we do many things right, I do hear questions about whether due impartiality is deliverable, even desirable, in these more polarised, divergent times. Importantly, it is not simply about left or right. This is more about whether people feel

⁸⁶ Newman, N. (2021) *Impartiality is still key for news audiences. Here’s how to rethink it for the digital age*. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risi-review/how-to-rethink-impartiality-digital-age> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁸⁷ Reuters Institute (2022) *Digital News Report 2022*. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁸⁸ BBC News (2021) *BBC unveils ‘significant’ 10-point impartiality plan*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-59088800> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁸⁹ BBC (2021) *Impartiality and editorial standards: BBC action plan, incorporating the response to the Serota Review*. Available at: <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

we see the world from their point of view. Our research shows that too many perceive us to be shaped by a particular perspective. We urgently need to champion and recommit to impartiality.'

Again, note the emphasis that this, in Davie's view, is not about political party bias, but about the views and perspectives of some groups of people being omitted. The first 'thematic review,' on coverage of 'taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt' was published in January of this year (2023). It was authored by Sir Andrew Dilnot and Michael Blastland. It concluded there was 'plenty to applaud' but there were 'gaps and assumptions' which 'can lead to output that appears to favour particular positions.' However, because these failings 'lean left and right', a 'charge of systematic political bias in this area is hard to sustain'. Their report criticised journalists for, at times, a lack of understanding of economic issues.⁹¹

While the BBC takes steps to address its cultural biases, there are those who disagree. They will point to the recently departed BBC chairman Richard Sharp and non-executive director Sir Robbie Gibb, both with strong ties to the Conservative party. Sharp had, in the past, donated £400,000 to the party over 20 years and his suitability was brought into question over his alleged role in securing a loan guarantee for Boris Johnson, said to have been worth £800,000, while he was applying for the role.⁹² The chairman is charged with protecting BBC independence. He has since resigned. Gibb is a journalist as well as a former No. 10 Director of Communications under Theresa May. Gibb's responsibilities include 'upholding and protecting the independence of the BBC by acting in the public interest and exercising independent judgement.'

Such figures, both appointed during Boris Johnson's tenure, will inevitably raise hackles. However, their political links are not unique, with former director general John Birt having been a Labour party member while his successor Greg Dyke had donated money to the same party. Former chair of the BBC Trust Chris Patten had been a Tory politician as well as EU commissioner. While there is this cultural imbalance in the BBC, some instead detect a political party turf war; others wish to protect that cultural imbalance as an emblem of their own values. They fail to understand the critique of the BBC, that Tim Davie is sensitive too, and mistake his efforts for some sort of cloak and dagger ploy to subvert the BBC's independence. They are likely to cite Davie's own historic and brief ties to the Tories.

⁹¹ Bushby, H. (2023) *Review of BBC economic coverage finds concerns but no systematic bias*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-64453200> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁹² Peach, N. (2023) *Ex-BBC chair Richard Sharp says his replacement will have a target on their back*. Available at: <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/money/other/ex-bbc-chair-richard-sharp-says-his-replacement-will-have-a-target-on-their-back/ar-AA1dAWth> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Class targets

The BBC hopes to resolve its 'class problem' with a target of 25 per cent of staff from working-class backgrounds.⁹³ This may seem like wishful thinking in that the presence of people from any particular social group is no guarantee they have a particular outlook. If they are drawn from elite universities, they will likely have the same prejudices as everyone else at the BBC. According to a British Social Attitudes survey, 44 per cent of working-class people voted to remain in the European Union,⁹⁴ while around one fifth believe immigration has benefited the country economically as well as culturally.⁹⁵ That is ample supply for the BBC to continue to recruit in its own apparent liberal image while applicants may be self-selecting. A leftist organisation will tend to attract leftists.

Moreover, a *de facto* quota may be at the expense of merit, with many middle-class people simply being the grandchildren of working-class strivers who have earned their place in society. Why should they be penalised for their family's achievements? Is it really right to recruit people based on their background, based on an image of how you would like your organisation to be? Why not just change your ways?

A mid-term review is, at time of writing, currently underway to assess if the BBC is impartial and 'representing audiences from working-class backgrounds'. Minutes from a meeting of its board's remuneration committee, attended by senior figures including Gibb and Davie, revealed discussions over reforms to recruitment to ensure diversity of opinion and perspective. They showed while the BBC was committed on this front, it had little firm idea of how it might measure this.⁹⁶

Where the BBC stands with the government

The BBC's charter was last renewed in 2016, which saw the end of the BBC's self-regulation with the appointment of Ofcom as its regulator as well as the abolition of the BBC Trust. Its current charter is set to expire in 2027.⁹⁷ The renewal also stipulated there would be a mid-term review led by the government, which was launched in May 2022. The purpose of this, according to the government, is to consider the need for reforms in order to 'achieve greater impartiality and build a more diverse workforce.' The review will 'evaluate how [the BBC] is representing audiences from working-class backgrounds,' as well as the effectiveness of its complaints procedure and its working-relationship with Ofcom. It will also examine the BBC's impact on commercial radio and local news providers.

⁹³ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2022) *BBC review to focus on impartiality and 'levelling up' job opportunities*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bbc-review-to-focus-on-impartiality-and-levelling-up-job-opportunities> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁹⁴ British Social Attitudes, *The vote to leave the EU Litmus test or lightning rod?* Available at: <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

⁹⁵ British Social Attitudes, *Overall attitudes to immigration: persistent concerns, deep divides*. Available at: <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-31/immigration/overall-attitudes-to-immigration-persistent-concerns-deep-divides.aspx> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁹⁶ Malnick, E. (2023) 'BBC plans to build 'diverse' workforce to fight off 'liberal bias' claims', *The Telegraph*, 10 June. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/06/10/bbc-liberal-bias-diverse-workforce-hiring-process/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁹⁷ Sweney, M. (2021) 'What changes can government make to the BBC?', *The Guardian*, 21 May. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/may/21/what-changes-can-government-make-to-the-bbc> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Simultaneously, the government announced a change to the 'framework agreement', a formal document which stipulates the BBC's regulatory duties in conjunction with its charter, giving the BBC:

'[A] legal duty to follow through on commitments to do more to reflect under-represented people and perspectives, reflecting this government's desire to see a BBC that promotes greater diversity of opinion.'

Targets were set for 25 per cent of staff to come from 'low socio-economic backgrounds', and the stipulation that 50 per cent of radio and 60 per cent of television production is spent outside of London by 2028, along with 1,000 apprenticeships per year by 2025. The government will be embarking on a review of the BBC licence fee and will look at alternative models of funding in advance of the BBC's charter review.⁹⁸

It seems the government is trying to force the BBC to be more reflective of the views of working-class people, and those outside of the London bubble. It further appears to be the case that there is a credible 'or else' hanging over the heads of the BBC, with regard to its privileged status as a broadcaster funded via the licence fee. Indeed, it appears that its future is up in the air, with a formal review to be announced this autumn (2023), with all alternatives to be considered, including a broadband levy, increased commercial activity, subscription, and advertising. According to reporting by *The Times*, the number of licence fee payees had fallen by 500,000 to 24.3 million last year. The BBC itself has previously 'floated' the idea of a tax on broadband.⁹⁹ However, it could be argued that this is merely punishing dissent in that people are increasingly choosing not to fund the BBC, only to be left with no choice under such a scheme, if they wish to use the internet.

Summary

This chapter has explored the topic of BBC impartiality, noting the high and noble standards that it sets itself as well as the many ways it falls short, something the BBC tacitly acknowledges and strives to rectify. One is left with the impression that for all the good intentions, the strict but flexible rules the BBC sets itself, there are a coterie of individuals within who just cannot seem to help themselves. Their failing can be described as an inability to see the world as others see it, to assume the truth of their own worldview. As Lord Hannan wrote on Twitter:

*'The fundamental problem with bias – the BBC, civil service, academia, whatever – is its lack of self-awareness,' adding that it could be summed up as 'your choices are partisan; ours are neutral.'*¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2022) *BBC review to focus on impartiality and 'levelling up' job opportunities*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bbc-review-to-focus-on-impartiality-and-levelling-up-job-opportunities> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

⁹⁹ *The Times*, July 18, 2023

¹⁰⁰ Curzon, M. (2022) 'BBC bias: Corporation's 'lack of self-awareness' will be its downfall', *Daily Express*, 22 February. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1569910/bbc-news-bbc-bias-self-awareness-downfall-Daniel-Hannan-twitter> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

In an age of political populism which sees societal elites as detached, self-interested, and running countries ideologically and at odds with the interests of most ordinary people, this will be taken with great affront.

Ultimately, the BBC's problem is one of 'moral hazard'. This is what economists call it when someone has the incentive to do something that increases their risk but are protected against the costs of doing so. People have always entered into the BBC with a sense of purpose, a mission. Burley speaks of this, as too does David Hendy in his book *The BBC: A People's History*. Historically, the BBC had a tension between conservatives who saw its role as following Matthew Arnolds injunction to bring 'the best which has been thought and said' into British homes, to bring 'sweetness and light', and its progressives who saw it as the vehicle to bring about an egalitarian society.¹⁰¹ Today the BBC has an imbalance, dominated by progressives and, in particular, young cadres with a renewed sense of passion and mission. Unfortunately, their political goals are at odds with what ordinary people want. The BBC becomes a victim of the populism it provokes and struggles to understand. Because its progressives suffer nothing of the pain of collecting the licence fee, they have felt a strong sense that they could do what they wanted. The licence granted them licence.

The problem is, eventually, a backlash comes, with enough people noticing the BBC has not reflected their concerns on things like immigration. Some within understand that patience is limited and that an elected government that rests on popular patience may eventually decide to pull the plug unless something is done. There is a risk that this corrective may go too far, something the BBC's progressives point out, only they have nothing to say about the BBC's progressive imbalance or why it is a problem. Addressing Johnson's refusal to be interviewed by him, Andrew Neil said,

*'Leaders' interviews have been a key part of the BBC's prime-time election coverage for decades. We do them on your behalf to scrutinise and hold to account those who would govern us. That is democracy.'*¹⁰²

If this is democracy, if this is done on our behalf, then the question is, who voted for you? The BBC's problem has been one of taxation without representation. It collects a viewer fee on threat of criminal sanction, but has not managed to represent adequately the views of those it professes to serve.

In the next chapter, we look at the BBC's educational output, as an example of how the BBC's biases manifest themselves in areas where the scrutiny is not so as intense as it is in politics.

¹⁰¹ David Hendy, *op. cit*

¹⁰² Sharman, J. (2019) 'Boris Johnson he has 'oven-ready' interview in attack on PM for dodging scrutiny', *The Independent*, 5 December. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/andrew-neil-boris-johnson-interview-video-questions-nhs-social-care-austerity-a9234956.html> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Chapter 2 – Bias in the BBC’s educational materials

Introduction

Why look at BBC education materials? The answer to this question is twofold, namely that this is an area that tends to evade scrutiny, as well as a forum where much of the biases and preoccupations alluded to in the last chapter tend to come to the forefront. Specifically, we are talking about those ‘culture war’ concerns that pertain to heightened scrutiny of subjects like race and history, with a bias in favour of negative aspects of British history. As will be documented, we will see a preoccupation with the struggles of certain political activists in BBC educational content, most often to do with climate change, race and gender equality. Often you will see the BBC encouraging young viewers into political activism as though direct action were the most noble form of politics, and not something that lends itself to confrontation over compromise. Indeed, the lack of scrutiny seems to act as licence to some of the content producers.

Reading the BBC’s Bitesize website, which provides educational materials aimed at school-age children, you are struck with the impression that there are two streams of content within it. You have articles that stick closely to the syllabuses as set by the various examination boards. These tend to be of a high quality and can be regarded as politically impartial, well-written and providing accessible materials that are widely available to young learners irrespective of their ability to pay. Content like this is highly commendable. Then you have a Bitesize that seems to offer more magazine-like content, often in the name of ‘support’. It is here where the most contentious material tends to pop up. In this chapter, numerous examples are given of articles that flout the BBC’s impartiality guidelines through presenting controversial ideas or promoting individuals without the slightest pretence of ‘due impartiality.’ The truth of what is being said is simply assumed as is their legitimacy.

The methodology of this study is not based on representative sampling of BBC content, but rather simply those articles that came to attention and were of concern. The evidence base assembled below is not sufficient to form a judgement on the whole of the BBC’s educational output. In response to studies of this kind, the BBC will often be dismissive; something along the lines of, ‘We don’t feel that highlighting a few unrelated pieces of output from across the BBC says anything meaningful about a 24-hour worldwide news operation.’¹⁰³ But such a response would ignore the fact that such a methodology would be enough to point out that there is a general laxity of editorial standards regarding impartiality in this area, given sufficient numbers of problematic examples. They may not be representative but they are too numerous not to be a matter of concern.

Again, going back to Lord Hannan’s point about bias being the choices *other* people make, not those in the BBC, there seems to be a basic lack of awareness that Greta Thunberg might be a controversial figure, that Britain might have a story of redemption to tell about the

¹⁰³ Urwin, R. (2022) ‘What’s going on at the BBC?’, *The Times*, 20 February. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/whats-going-on-at-the-bbc-5pv7dz9fn> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Empire and slavery, that concepts like ‘social justice’ are controversial ideas and not to be treated as uncontested fact. This chapter begins with looking at the growth of BBC educational materials, most notably Bitesize, that began as a revision aid before branching out into offering ‘support’ for school students. Given that much of this content will end up in classrooms, the legal standards for political impartiality in schools are also laid out. It should be noted that because of the BBC’s online clout, Bitesize articles often pop up in searches for information on the subjects they cover, meaning they are often a resource for adults too. The chapter then looks at examples of biased or uncontested political content popping up on its websites BBC Bitesize and BBC Teach, grouped under thematic headings.

It is important we scrutinise these things since the BBC has a privileged place in shaping young minds, in informing them of their country’s past and present. Should it be promoting something unduly negative to the point of being politically subversive, then this would be a matter of great concern as the BBC’s charter approaches renewal.

Development of the BBC’s educational programmes

BBC Bitesize was launched in 1998 as BBC GCSE Bitesize, aiming to help pupils with their revision for GCSE exams. When launched, it covered seven core subjects, whereas today it has over 35.¹⁰⁴ By 2000, it has expanded to offering educational material for children of all ages, as well as material for parents.¹⁰⁵

By 2003, Bitesize was reaching 69 per cent of 15- to 16-year-olds.¹⁰⁶ In 2005, it was claimed that it was used by ‘around two-thirds of students and teachers,’ according to the BBC’s annual report.¹⁰⁷ In 2016, the service was used by nine out of 10 15- to 16-year-olds during the summer term. Users were now able to sign in to Bitesize, allowing personalised content as well as recording their progress. A Bitesize revision app was launched.¹⁰⁸ In 2016/17, BBC Teach was launched, initially as a YouTube channel, that ‘assists teachers to find curriculum-linked video for use in lessons.’ At this point, Bitesize was reaching ‘around 80 per cent of secondary students and around 40 per cent of primary students.’¹⁰⁹

The BBC was also running partnership schemes, including a:

‘...major partnership with Wellcome and thirty other organisations and universities, designed to inspire primary school science and help counter the STEM crisis in the UK.’

¹⁰⁴ BBC, *The good ship Bitesize is launched*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zmjdhbk> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁰⁵ BBC, *Education: Schools Online*. Available at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20000610073844/http://www2.bbc.co.uk/education/revision/index.shtml> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁰⁶ BBC (2004) *Annual Report and Accounts 2003/2004*. Available at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/2003-04/bbcannualreport_200304.pdf (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁰⁷ BBC (2005) *Annual Report and Accounts 2004/2005*. Available at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/2004-05/bbc_2004_05.pdf (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁰⁸ BBC (2016) *BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2015/16*. Available at: <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/reports/pdf/bbc-annualreport-201516.pdf> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁰⁹ BBC (2017) *BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2016/17*. Available at: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/reports/pdf/bbc-annualreport-201617.pdf> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Its 'Our Make It' campaign 'used digital assets and outreach events to reach boys and young men from disadvantaged backgrounds who are failing at school and seeking employment.'¹¹⁰ In 2018/19, Bitesize underwent some upgrades to improve functionality:

'Working closely with organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Careers and Enterprise Company and the Gatsby Foundation, we have created an extensive Bitesize Careers offer to open up the world of work.'

The same year also saw the launch of 'a support section with material aimed at helping our audience deal with a range of wider needs from exam stress to resilience building.' The use of BBC Teach has increased 'considerably.'¹¹¹

The Covid-19 pandemic saw Bitesize expand further, with the BBC offering 'a *Bitesize Daily* package of lessons and original programmes to ensure that every household, whatever their child's age, had access to curriculum-supported learning'. At least 5 million users used the website in the first week of the summer term, more than three times that of the year before. By the end of the school year, the BBC has published almost 2,000 Bitesize Daily Lessons, informed by school curricula. So-called 'Impact partnerships' increased, with more than 45 partner organisations involved to create 'an unprecedented fourteen weeks of home learning for every household, whatever the child's age.'¹¹²

Once lockdown restrictions were lifted and schools reopened, usage of Bitesize dropped back to pre-pandemic levels, with 1.8 million unique UK browsers accessing the site each week in 2021/22, down from 2.7 million the year before. Seventy-five per cent of secondary school pupils used the website and 64 per cent of primary school pupils. Sixty-five per cent of secondary school users said Bitesize helps them to achieve better grades. Eighty-two per cent of under-16-users said that it helped them understand their studies more.¹¹³

The 2021/22 BBC annual report noted that the BBC was embarking on a 'three-year-plan aimed at increasing Bitesize's contribution to levelling up of learner outcomes for 5-16-year-olds', entailing refreshing its Key Stage 3 service and 'broadening and deepening' its primary coverage. Bitesize Reception, aimed at the very youngest, was scheduled to be launched in 2022. The BBC also ran a Bitesize – The Regenerators 'sustainability education campaign' that was 'closely aligned to COP 26.' The BBC produced 84 hours of content for Bitesize that year, while BBC Teach continued its expansion, promising to:

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ BBC (2018) *Annual Report and Accounts 2017/18*. Available at:

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/reports/pdf/bbc_annualreport_201718.pdf (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹¹² BBC (2020) *BBC Group Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20*. Available at:

<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport/2019-20.pdf> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹¹³ BBC (2022) *BBC Group Annual Report and Accounts 2021/22*. Available at:

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport/ara-2021-22.pdf> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

‘...continue our work to bring greater diversity to our history content, covering further content that reflects the histories and experiences of black and Asian communities in the UK.’¹¹⁴

A request was made to the BBC under the Freedom of Information Act to request details of how much money was spent on Bitesize and Teach, along with the names of identities of its partner organisations. These were rebuffed by the BBC, citing an exemption to the Act pertaining to ‘art, journalism or literature’. This exemption is used liberally by the BBC, with almost one half of requests under the Act rejected over the last 10 years in this manner. (See the Appendix for details.)

What is the law on political impartiality in schools?

Given that BBC Bitesize and Teach resources will often end up in classrooms, as either supplementary material or forming the basis for lessons, it makes sense to consider them in light of the government’s expectations on political impartiality in schools, as well as with regard to the BBC’s own rules on impartiality.

Classroom content is in fact governed by law, namely the Education Act 1996. This prohibits ‘the promotion of partisan political views’, as well as placing on schools a ‘duty to secure balanced treatment of political issues.’¹¹⁵ According to government guidance, schools ‘must not encourage pupils to support or adopt a one-sided view expressed with a political purpose.’ This covers the views of political parties as well as the views of campaigning organisations. Schools must ‘present different views on political issues in a fair and dispassionate way, avoiding bias.’ Pupils are encouraged to engage with politics in a manner appropriate to their age, only teachers are prohibited from indoctrinating them as well as having a duty to challenge extreme views.¹¹⁶

Historical events, ‘where relevant to current political issues and debate’, fall within the legal expectations on political impartiality. Concerning teaching about climate change, schools are not obliged to present ‘misinformation’ such as ‘unsubstantiated claims that anthropogenic climate change is not occurring’ in order to provide balance. However, teaching on the ‘potential solutions for tackling climate change’, may amount to a ‘political issue’ and ‘this part of the topic should be taught in a balanced manner, with teachers not promoting any of the partisan political views covered to pupils.’¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ UK Government (1996) *Education Act 1996*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/part/V/chapter/IV/crossheading/politics> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹¹⁶ Department for Education, *What you need to know about political impartiality in schools*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹¹⁷ Department for Education (2022) *Political impartiality in schools*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools/political-impartiality-in-schools#teaching-about-political-issues> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Case studies

We now turn to a selection of articles and pages taken from BBC Bitesize and BBC Teach resources, grouped under broad headings. For each example of biased content, the guidelines they potentially breach from the BBC's Editorial Guidelines are presented.¹¹⁸

1. Race relations

*Example 1. 'Six key events in black history you may not know about'*¹¹⁹

This article looks at 'Six key events in black history which you may have not heard of', as chosen by Professor Kehinde Andrews, who teaches 'black studies' at Birmingham City University. That Andrew's views are at the very least contentious, can be evidenced by his belief 'whiteness' is a 'psychosis',¹²⁰ that Winston Churchill is popular because 'he kind of is the perfect embodiment of white supremacy', and that the 'British empire did far more harm' than the Nazis.¹²¹ He has described the late Queen as 'the number one symbol of white supremacy' and the 'manifestation of the institutional racism we have to encounter on daily basis'.¹²²

The BBC article presents itself as a written narrative incorporating quotations from Andrews. No alternative views are offered. It is claimed 'A rebellion by enslaved people may have ended slavery itself', with the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) cited as evidence. We are told 'the abolition of the slave trade happened in Britain in 1807, although the move by Parliament was preceded by years of rebellion from the slaves themselves.' Andrews explains further:

'We like to have it that Britain was good, and benevolent, and that's how we ended slavery. That's not true. Haiti was free in 1804. It's 1807 when Britain abolished the slave trade but it doesn't abolish slavery itself. It continued until about 1838 in British colonies. The abolition was about fear of rebellion, not benevolence.'

This can be easily countered. Firstly, it rests on the false inference that because A happened before B, A must be the cause of B. Secondly, this statement ignores the evidenced popular moral revulsion at the slave trade within Britain.¹²³ It further flounders on

¹¹⁸ BBC, *Section 4: Impartiality – Guidelines*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/impartiality/guidelines/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹¹⁹ BBC Bitesize, *Six key events in black history you may not know about*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zq66dp3> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²⁰ 'Whiteness is a process rooted in the social structure, one that induces a form of psychosis framed by its irrationality, which is beyond any rational engagement' See: Andrews, K. (2016) 'The Psychosis of Whiteness: The Celluloid Hallucinations of *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*', *Journal of Black Studies*, 47(5) pp.435-453. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0021934716638802> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²¹ Tingle, R. (2021) 'If he holds those views why is he living off the public purse?': Outrage as controversial taxpayer-funded black studies professor who says Britain is 'built on racism' claims Churchill was 'a white supremacist' in debate', *Daily Mail*, 12 February. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9253179/Controversial-black-studies-professor-claimed-British-Empire-worse-Nazis.html> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²² Andrews, K. (2022) *Opinion | I Don't Mourn the Queen*. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/13/for-black-britons-the-late-queen-is-the-number-one-symbol-of-white-supremacy-00056262> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²³ See, for example, the numerous petitions sent to parliament such as this one in 1806: UK Parliament, *Petition from the inhabitants of Manchester in support of the Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill*. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/tradeindustry/slavetrade/from-the-parliamentary-collections/the-british-slave-trade/petition-in-support-of-the-foreign-slave-trade-abolition-bill-page/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

the point that if there were no altruism, then how do you explain the British suppression of the slave trade at considerable cost in countries where it had no dominion, such as Brazil in 1850?¹²⁴

There is a further concern that the BBC is pushing a narrative that diminishes the role of parliamentary abolition while giving undue prominence to the role of violent revolution. Andrews neglects to inform the reader that the Haitian revolution led to genocide against the white and mixed-race populations of Haiti;¹²⁵ that forced labour persisted thereafter,¹²⁶ and that the island was governed subsequently by one of the worst dictatorships.¹²⁷ Today, GDP per capita in Haiti is \$1,821, compared to \$4,586 in the former British colony of Jamaica, wherein slavery was abolished while under British rule.¹²⁸ Some argued at the time that the Haitian revolution was precisely an example of why abolition was not a good idea; it might be said the extremity of the revolution only bolstered the cause of the anti-abolitionists.¹²⁹

Another 'key event' is the death of Martin Luther King. Andrews explains its significance:

'This really started the Black Power era in the USA. It was there before but the death of Martin Luther King sparked it off in a big way. The Black Panther Party was formed in 1966 and was relatively small, but after the death of Martin Luther King, it grew. They believed they couldn't rely on the current systems being reformed so they became more militant. They wanted to end segregation and bring in race relation legislation.'

This is to present a sanitised view of the Black Panthers. This was an extremist, Marxist revolutionary political organisation embroiled in violence.¹³⁰ It advocated for 'an end to the robbery by the Capitalists of our Black Community', revolution and radical land reform.¹³¹ According to the website marxists.org:

'From the tenets of Maoism they [the Black Panthers] set the role of their Party as the vanguard of the revolution and worked to establish a united front, while from Marxism they addressed the capitalist economic system, embraced the theory of

¹²⁴ Castelow, E. (2023) *The British Empire's Role In Ending Slavery Worldwide*. Available at: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Britains-Role-Ending-Slavery-Worldwide/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²⁵ Girard, P.R. (2006) 'Caribbean genocide: racial war in Haiti, 1802-4', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 39(2) pp.138-161. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00313220500106196> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²⁶ McKey, C. (2016) *The Economic consequences of the Haitian Revolution*. Available at: <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²⁷ COHA (2010) *The Haitian Timeline: A History of Military Dictatorship and Civil Rule (Revised and Expanded)*. Available at: <https://coha.org/military-dictatorship-in-haiti/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²⁸ Countryeconomy.com, *Country comparison: Haiti vs Jamaica*. Available at: <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/haiti/jamaica?sc=XE34> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹²⁹ Wikipedia, '1804 Haitian massacre'. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1804_Haitian_massacre#Effect_on_American_society (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³⁰ Anthony, A. (2015) 'Black power's coolest radicals (but also a gang of ruthless killers)', *The Observer*, 18 October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/18/black-powers-coolest-radicals-black-panthers-vanguard-of-the-revolution-stanley-nelson-interview> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³¹ Marxists Internet Archive, *The Ten-Point Program*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

*dialectical materialism, and represented the need for all workers to forcefully take over the means of production.*¹³²

It was embroiled in gross criminality. According to *The New York Times*:

*'Historians have detailed [the Black Panthers'] mistreatment of female members, extortion, drug dealing, embezzlement and murder. At least 19 Panthers were killed in shootouts with one another, the authorities or other black revolutionaries.'*¹³³

Here is one particularly grizzly account of torture and murder of 19-year-old Alex Rackley who was suspected of being an informant:

'At Ethan Gardens, they [the Black Panthers] beat Rackley with a stick and poured the pots of boiling water over him. They tied him to a chair in the basement... With a gun pointed at him, they demanded that he spill the beans about informers in their midst...

*'Two days after the show trial in the Ethan Gardens basement, two days that he spent tied to a bed and lay in his own waste, the Panthers drove Rackley in a Buick Rivera (borrowed from a police informant) to a secluded swamp in the town of Middlefield. They shot him in the head and the back. They dumped his corpse in the Cochinchaug River.'*¹³⁴

Its membership was small, at its peak no more than a few thousand.¹³⁵ Its policies can rightly be described as 'black nationalist', not integrationist, while its agenda promised much more than 'race relation legislation'. This was the repudiation of the Civil Rights Movement which campaigned for legal equality, not its evolution contrary to what is suggested. As Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver said, 'If people had listened to Huey Newton and me in the 1960s, there would have been a holocaust in this country'.¹³⁶

Other 'key events' suggested by Andrews are race riots in the UK and the Bristol bus boycott. There is the sense these are deployed to create the impression that racial violence in Britain was as bad as in America and that racial discrimination here was comparable to Jim Crow in the American South. As Andrews says of Malcolm X's visit to Smethwick in 1965, one of his 'key events':

'During his speech Malcolm X made a direct connection to what was happening in the UK to what was happening in the States. The only difference to America is that the black population was larger...'

¹³² Marxists Internet Archive, *The Black Panther Party*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³³ *The New York Times*, 'Obituaries: Not Forgotten'. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/obituaries/archives/huey-newton> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³⁴ New Haven Independent (2013) *Black Panther Torture "Trial" Tape Surfaces*. Available at: https://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/article/rackley_trial_tape_surfaces/ (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³⁵ Britannica, *Black Panther Party*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³⁶ Glazov, J. *Bobby Seale's Confession: David Horowitz Was Right On*. Available at: <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/695> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

There were no lynchings, nor formal legal segregation, nor legalised discrimination in the United Kingdom, unlike in America. Racial violence was never on the same scale, nor was there a racist extremist organisation to compare with the Ku Klux Klan. Reading this article, there is a clear bias towards the role of radical revolutionaries in improving the lives of black people. Notably, Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech is not mentioned as a 'key event', despite it being perhaps the greatest speech of the last century. Nor the abolitions of slavery in Britain in 1807 and America in 1865, nor the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, all of far greater significance as well as representative of beneficial change coming from within the system, not imposed from without.

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4.3.8 Due impartiality normally allows for programmes and other output to explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue or provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed. This should be clearly signposted when dealing with 'controversial subjects'. The existence of a range of views and their respective weights should be acknowledged, and neither those views nor their respective weights should be misrepresented.

4.3.12 We should not automatically assume that contributors from other organisations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities and think-tanks) are unbiased. Appropriate information about their affiliations, funding and particular viewpoints should be made available to the audience, when relevant to the context.

Example 2. 'The Civil Rights Movement in America'¹³⁷

This is a revision module to assist school children in their exams. It presents a concise history of American race relations from 1865 through to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Largely, it presents a competent description of the major events of the era, noting that legal agitation began as early as 1909 with the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) by W.E.B. DuBois.

However, there is a bias towards radicalism at the expense of black conservatives. It is written:

'Along with Malcolm X, the BPP [Black Panthers] represented strands of civil rights activism that drew attention to experiences of racial inequality happening in the cities of the north and California.'

¹³⁷ BBC Bitesize, *The civil rights movement in America*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zcpcwmn/revision/1> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Malcolm X and the Black Panthers were ruptures with the civil rights movement, and espoused much more than 'drawing attention' to racial inequality, being advocates of racial separation and Marxist revolutionary politics respectively (see below). As even Kehinde Andrews has said, 'Malcom X is not a Civil Rights leader'.¹³⁸ To say:

'... the Black Panthers sought to move the Civil Rights Movement to another level by encouraging black communities to become self-sufficient by setting up food, housing and education schemes, as well as policing their own communities...'

is to mistake segregation for the integrationist ideals of the civil rights movement. These were Maoists. It further ignores their rampant criminality outlined above. While DuBois is mentioned, his rival Booker T. Washington, who stressed the need for vocational education, is not. Little, if any, attention is paid to the fundamental role of the black church in organising the civil rights movement,¹³⁹ which is portrayed solely as the efforts of black people.

An exam question – 'What did the Civil Rights Movement set out to achieve? Did it achieve it? As a result, would you say that it was successful?' – with a model answer offered, is presented. Circumspection as to the aims of the movement is expressed to allow for the inclusion of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers:

'It is difficult for historians to know exactly what the movement set out to achieve because there is no single event which marked the start of a civil rights campaign. Some historians argue that it began with the legal protection of the NAACP at the start of the twentieth century, whereas others believe it began following the decision of Brown vs Board of Education in 1954. The ambitions of the movement also changed over time, as leaders like Malcolm X and the BPP [Black Panthers] helped make clear that fight for racial inequality needed to extend beyond the South.'

The aims of the moderate civil rights movement proper were clear: an end to legal segregation and equality before the law. The aims of the radicals were separatism and revolution. One sought reform within the political system so that its rights and protections could be extended to all. The other sought their destruction. These cannot be reconciled. The model answer further states:

'By the end of the 1960s, most laws, even in the most racist southern states, had changed for the better. But enforcing those laws, restructuring the economy to bring about equality, and putting a stop to racism were battles still to be won.'

'Restructuring the economy' entails government intervention which is a political question, not a given, to which political conservatives and classical liberals take objection to. Moreover, this ignores the many affirmative action programmes, anti-poverty legislation,

¹³⁸ Nottingham Contemporary (2015) *Black Lives Matter session 2-3-4-5 #BlackLivesMatterUK Ft Akala*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/live/ygZhl4lC5zg?feature=share&t=10404> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹³⁹ Ghose, S.K. *The Role of the Black Church in the American Civil Rights Movement*. Available at: <https://uits.edu.bd/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

and minimum wage laws passed within America that were attempts at ‘restructuring the economy’.

The Bitesize article further adds:

‘In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. This led to a wave of riots that destroyed many black communities across American cities. Some of these communities never recovered. To this day, poverty, and violence and discrimination against black people continues.’

This might leave the impression that the black situation has not improved, and that racist violence has not lessened. It ignores the alternative view which is that while a successful black middle-class has emerged,¹⁴⁰ much of black America has stagnated for a variety of other reasons, most notably the decline of the black family.¹⁴¹

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Example 3. ‘Ghettos and black American radicalism’¹⁴²

This is a revision guide for older students and part of the Civil Rights in the USA series of articles. It presents a brief history of radical black politics in the 20th century. Profiles are presented of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Black Power, The Black Panthers, the government’s response, and the impact of black radicalism.

The page on Malcolm X claims his father was ‘murdered in a racist attack’. However, there is some uncertainty surrounding the death of Earl Little, who was runover by a streetcar with his death officially ruled suicide. His son believed he was murdered by a white racist group called the Black Legion.¹⁴³ A sanitised view of the Nation of Islam, of which Malcolm X was a member, is presented. We are told it ‘argued for the separation of black and white people’ and that it ‘considered white people to be devils’. Its teachings that white people were the creation of a mad scientist named Yakub and that a space ship will come to eradicate

¹⁴⁰ Kochhar, R. and Sechopoulos, S. (2022) *How the American middle class has changed in the past five decades*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/20/how-the-american-middle-class-has-changed-in-the-past-five-decades/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023). Thernstrom, A. and Thernstrom, S. (1998) *Black Progress: How far we’ve come, and how far we have to go*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/black-progress-how-far-weve-come-and-how-far-we-have-to-go/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴¹ Hymowitz, K.S. (2015) *The Distorted World of Ta-Nehisi Coates*. Available at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/09/ta-nehisi-coates-wrong/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴² BBC Bitesize, *Ghettos and black American radicalism*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/ztcj6sg/revision/1> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴³ McGill School Of Computer Science, *Malcolm X*. Available at: https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/m/Malcolm_X.htm (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

‘whiteness’ and establish a black utopia are omitted.¹⁴⁴ As too are its anti-Semitism and flirtation with American Nazis.¹⁴⁵

While we are told Malcolm X ‘discovered that many of his fellow pilgrims were actually white and were not any different to himself’, his own racist views are not explored,¹⁴⁶ nor his own segregationist views. Here is a quote from a speech he gave in 1963:

‘We must have a permanent solution. A temporary solution won’t do. Tokenism will no longer suffice. The Honourable Elijah Muhammad has the only permanent solution. Twenty million ex-slaves must be permanently separated from our former slave master and placed on some land that we can call our own. Then we can create our own jobs. Control our own economy. Solve our own problems instead of waiting on the American white man to solve our problems for us.’¹⁴⁷

Malcolm X undoubtedly had mellowed before his assassination, but the emphasis is on his break with the Nation of Islam and his path towards moderation, rather than his rejection of the civil rights and integrationist approach that had characterised most of his political career.

Further sanitisation of political radicals applies to the treatment of the Black Panthers. We are told ‘in the ghettos, self-help groups were organised for black American communities’ and that they were the victims of police violence.¹⁴⁸ Their own record of violence, criminality, and Marxist revolutionary politics is passed over.

In terms of the impact of black radicalism, we are told ‘many white people lost patience with the violent approach of Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers’, as though these organisations enjoyed popular support from black people. Nor is any genuine attempt made to assess their impact or size. We are however told about The Kerner Commission, which investigated the race riots of 1968, whose findings included ‘40 per cent of all black Americans lived in poverty’ and this was ‘highlighted as the main causes of the riots’. Omitted is the Moynihan report of 1965 which argued that the collapse of the black family could account for much of black poverty.¹⁴⁹

Across all Bitesize content on race in America, the emphasis is placed on political conflict, with the role of the radicals stressed, who are presented as less extreme than they actually were. Black moderates who argued for the importance of education and vocational training

¹⁴⁴ Curtis, E.E. (2021) ‘The Nation of Islam’, *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*, pp. 658-672. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbv8.37> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴⁵ SPLC, *Nation of Islam*. Available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).
McPheeters, S. (2015) *When Malcolm X Met the Nazis*. Available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dpwamv/when-malcolm-x-met-the-nazis-0000620-v22n4> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, this interview:

David Hoffman (2018) *Malcolm X Didn't Like White People & Didn't Believe That They Would Stop Being Racist*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itsyTh4QbFo> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴⁷ Blackpast.org (2013) *Malcolm X, “Racial Separation”*. Available at: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-racial-separation/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴⁸ BBC Bitesize, *Ghettos and black American radicalism*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/ztcj6sg/revision/6> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁴⁹ Geary, D. (2015) ‘The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition’, *The Atlantic*, 14 September. Available at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

are excluded, with no mention of Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute made (these were on the A-level syllabus when I studied this period back in 2000). Nor is the role of the black church given its due. Yet the numbers mobilised through church networks must surely have outweighed the membership of the Black Panthers by a significant factor.

The Bitesize article further adds, 'by the start of the 1970s, progress was being made' with the passing of the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Equal Opportunity Act:

'Together these laws were known as "affirmative action". Affirmative action made it necessary for government agencies, state governments, local governments and public organisations to hire African Americans.'

Whether or not this is 'progress' can be disputed. Thomas Sowell studied the impact of affirmative action programmes across the globe, declared them a 'worldwide disaster', arguing that they grow to encompass more people, benefit those already fortunate within the preferred groups, stoke resentments between groups, and encourage fraudulent claims of group membership.¹⁵⁰ This is the dissenting view on affirmative action. Whether or not you agree with it is not the issue. The point is why is a supposedly politically neutral public broadcaster hailing a hotly disputed political measure as 'progress'?

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2. The British Empire and colonialism

*Example 1. 'Colonialism – "Display it like you stole it."'*¹⁵¹

This page concerns British colonialism and is based on a profile of a young woman identified only as 'Alice'. She is described as 'a big fan of museums and our country's past' who is 'aware there is a complicated side to British history'. During the course of writing this report, it appears to have been deleted but is available through an internet archiver.¹⁵²

She identifies herself in an accompanying video as a 'museum educator, an activist'. Her views and opinions are presented without any contrasting opinion or challenge. She is responsible for running 'uncomfortable art tours'. These are tours of major art galleries and museums, including the National Gallery and V&A. In her own words:

¹⁵⁰ Sowell, T. (1989) "'Affirmative Action': A Worldwide Disaster", *Commentary Magazine*, December. Available at: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/thomas-sowell-2/affirmative-action-a-worldwide-disaster/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁵¹ Original link no longer valid: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zk6992p>

¹⁵² BBC Bitesize, *Colonialism: "Display it like you stole it."*. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201105025701/https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zk6992p> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

'And the idea is that in a two-hour tour with me you can get a bit of a potted history of British imperialism and the way that it's been represented over time. I use these badgers [sic] on my tour that say display it like you stole it. And it's a slogan that's intended to push museums to do something differently.'

'If they have these pieces in their collections that are taken violently, they need to be honest and show us that story. They need to display it like they stole it and actually make it clear in the labels and in the way they presented in the galleries.'

*'I also have postcards that say 'dear art gallery'. The idea of this, of the postcards and of the badges, is to encourage visitors to feel that they have some control and some way of speaking back to these institutions. It's a little way of showing your resistance and showing that you know this was going on here, and have these questions. It's supposed to help you connected [sic] to the things that are making you uncomfortable within that museum space, so that you can articulate it and speak back to the museum.'*¹⁵³

The postcard she hands out says:

'Dear Art Gallery/Museum,

Your label for _____ needs improvement

Currently it is

- ☐ Racist
- ☐ Colonialist/Imperialist
- ☐ Classist
- ☐ Homophobic
- ☐ Sexist
- ☐ Trans-Erasing
- ☐ Gender Essentialist
- ☐ Ableist
- ☐ Totally Impenetrable

Additional comments _____

I'm sure you didn't think this through'¹⁵⁴

This article is the promotion of a self-described 'activist' who is engaged in trying to pressure cultural institutions into change according to what she wants. The BBC material is promoting the 'potted history' without any balance, even though her actions may indeed be newsworthy. Moreover, the idea of 'display it like you stole it' is controversial, in that many

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ The Exhibitionist. Available at: <https://www.theexhibitionist.org/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

artefacts stemming from the British Empire will not have been stolen, but acquired lawfully under whatever rules there were at the time.

The article itself further presents a one-sided and critical view of the British Empire. For instance, we are told:

‘Colonialism in places like Africa meant the use of a slave trade. People from those countries were captured, transported and sold to other countries. Between 1532 and 1832 British ships took at least four million Africans to the Americas to work as enslaved labour.’

Not mentioned are the facts that slavery was indigenous to Africa before the British arrived there and that the British Empire sought to suppress the slave trade within its colonies and further afield – something without comparable historical precedent and at great cost. Omitted is the fact that Africans were captured by other Africans and sold to British slavers. For an article based on ‘telling the truth about our history’, these are startling oversights.

It continues: ‘It is uncomfortable to learn how the Empire used to believe in the superiority of white people.’

Even the simplest historical analysis of these events suggests they were more complicated than this. While there were colonialists who believed in the innate superiority of whites, there were also those who saw a basic equality and that the role of the British empire was to improve its colonies through education and technology. Thus, the claim that ‘Britain also profited from the resources of the countries it ruled over...’ ignores the fact that the colonies in question also profited through better governance and more efficient economic production.¹⁵⁵ None of these counter arguments are presented. Whether or not you agree with them, and they are a matter of intense historical debate, it is not the place of the BBC to present the views of an activist as authoritative and without challenge.

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¹⁵⁵ Gilley, B. *The Case for Colonialism*. Available at: https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the_case_for_colonialism (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

4.3.17 The BBC must remain independent and distanced from government initiatives, campaigners, charities and their agendas, no matter how apparently worthy the cause or how much their message appears to be accepted or uncontroversial.

4.3.19 Social action output can form an important part of the BBC's public service. However, care is required to ensure the BBC sets its own social action agenda and decides its own priorities:

we must ensure that our output does not simply embrace the agenda of any particular campaign groups or charities and that we treat groups objectively and do not favour one above another...

*Example 2. 'Decolonising the curriculum'*¹⁵⁶

This article features a short film about a 'group of sixth formers from London' who 'are campaigning to change the way British colonial history is taught on the National Curriculum'. During the course of writing this report, it appears to have been deleted but is still available from an internet archiver.¹⁵⁷

These students 'have family connections to the British Empire' and 'feel' it should be a compulsory element of schooling. In other words, they are activists campaigning for a change in educational policy. Their views are presented without contest or balance. The article names them as 'activists'. They present a highly ideological, negative and contested view of the British empire. Here are some examples:

'I would describe colonialism as a country having partial or even total control over a country, and then going on to further exploit them economically.'

'In the case of the British Empire, colonialism was enacted via the transportation of goods and labour from the majority of the global south, which included Africa and South America.'

That one student thinks the British had colonial possessions in South America is revealing, as to is her belief, seemingly, that the North American colonies qualify as the 'global south'.

One student says:

'In Year 8 I was taught about the slave trade. And my teacher started the lesson by proclaiming that slavery has nothing to do with race and I remember feeling so angry...'

This is given especial prominence and yet it is true. Slavery has existed across the world, both between races and within races. White people enslaved black people, black people enslaved other black people, Arabs enslaved black and white people. Not every black person

¹⁵⁶ Original link no longer valid: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z7g66v4>

¹⁵⁷ BBC Bitesize, *Decolonising the curriculum*. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220711222502/https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z7g66v4> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

in America prior to 1865 was a slave, while a minority of blacks owned black slaves.¹⁵⁸ Certainly, slavery has much to do with the history of race relations in America, as well as the European empires, but the relationship is not necessary but sufficient. Before the Norman Invasion of England, some 10 per cent of the indigenous population were thought to have been slaves.¹⁵⁹

The term 'decolonisation' is used uncritically, without acknowledgment that it is contested. We are told 'these activists mean we should question whose viewpoint the information is coming from' and that 'they believe history lessons are currently a version written from a colonial point of view'. As one says, 'What we learn is the victor's story... decolonising means identifying that we are learning *a story*' [Italics in original].

No one would dispute there are different perspectives on history and that this feeds into historiography. It is quite another thing for the BBC to promote the view that British schools are teaching colonial propaganda without any challenge. Further claims made by the students are:

'Decolonising is about kind of challenging the power structures that we live in.'

'Our curriculum limits their expectations and aspirations that black students have.'

These are political statements presented to a young and impressionable audience without challenge. As one student says:

'And there's like a parasitic kind of relationship because it's exploitations [sic]. So the country that you're stealing from isn't gaining anything at all from this relationship.'

Contrast this with the following words of former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh:

*'Today, with the balance and perspective offered by the passage of time and the benefit of hindsight, it is possible for an Indian prime minister to assert that India's experience with Britain had its beneficial consequences too. Our notions of the rule of law, of a Constitutional government, of a free press, of a professional civil service, of modern universities and research laboratories, have all been fashioned in the crucible where an age-old civilisation of Indian met the dominant Empire of the day. These are all elements which we still value and cherish. Our judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy and our police are all great institutions, derived from British-Indian administration, and they have served our country exceedingly well.'*¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Hewitt, D.G. (2018) *10 Black Slaveowners That Will Tear Apart Historical Perception*. Available at: <https://historycollection.com/10-black-slaveowners-that-will-tear-apart-historical-perception/9/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁵⁹ Morris, M. (2013) *Normans and Slavery: Breaking the Bonds*. Available at: <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/normans-and-slavery-breaking-bonds> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶⁰ Cited in David Gilmour (2019) *The British in India*. Penguin Books.

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Example 3. 'The abolition of the slave trade in Britain'¹⁶¹

Much of the Bitesize content is very good and offers concise and readable material covering a wide range of topics to match the school curriculum. That does not mean even when the resources are generally good, there are not biases or important omissions. The Bitesize page on the abolition of the slave trade is one such example, in that while it covers the parliamentary and legal campaign to abolish slavery along with slave rebellions in the colonies, it omits the efforts to suppress the slave trade through military measures. This is a fair criticism in that while the page title stresses '...in Britain', it refers to events elsewhere, including the Haitian revolution.

Between 1808 and 1860, it is estimated that 1,600 slave ships were captured by the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, with more than 150,000 slaves liberated. Thousands of

¹⁶¹ BBC Bitesize, *The abolition of the slave trade in Britain*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/z4x747h/articles/zn7rbqt#zkgtxbk9> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

crewmen died in the process.¹⁶² Suppression cost at least £250,000 per year, roughly £1 billion today, for half a century, with the impact on the economy put at 1.8 per cent of national income over 60 years, between 1808 and 1867.¹⁶³ By omitting such facts, we are left with a story that British efforts to abolish the slave trade are rather underwhelming, and the true story of a people seeking to do the right thing is not told.

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3. Environment and climate change

*Example 1. 'The sides of Greta Thunberg's life we don't always see'*¹⁶⁴

This article is a promotional piece for a BBC film about the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. We are told the film 'looks at the 12-month break she took from school to concentrate on her activism' and that:

'not only do the cameras follow her giving speeches and meeting experts on climate change and its effects, there is also an opportunity to see Greta's life away from the international stage'.

The article presents a candid look into the life of Thunberg, stating to its intended young audience: 'if you've ever wondered how to combine being a teenager with a drive to stop global warming, here are some moments to look out for'. She is presented as a normal, regular kid who happens to be on a mission to get 'the climate change message across to billions of people'. The problem here is that the BBC is assuming the truth of whatever 'message' there might be, despite the fact there is enough contestation from critics like Bjorn Lomborg as to cause the BBC's commitment to 'due impartiality' to kick in.¹⁶⁵

We are told Thunberg gets embarrassed by her father's clothes and that she enjoys the company of horses. We learn she does not know everything about climate change so meets with 'experts on subjects including glaciers, dairy farming and reindeer herding'. A meeting with her 'hero' Sir David Attenborough is mentioned, who makes the claim that 'My generation has made a mess of things, we've known what is happening and we've done nothing. Well, next to nothing.' This is Sir David's opinion that would be contested by many, yet no balance is offered in the Bitesize article.

¹⁶² Sky History, *The blockade of Africa: How Royal Navy ships fought the slave trade*. Available at: <https://www.history.co.uk/article/the-blockade-of-africa-how-royal-naval-ships-suppressed-the-slave-trade> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶³ Biggar, N. (2020) 'Britain's slave trade and the problem with 'decolonisation'', *The Spectator*, 29 November. Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/britain-slave-trade-and-the-problem-with-decolonisation/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶⁴ BBC Bitesize, *The sides of Greta Thunberg's life we don't always see*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z2g62v4> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶⁵ Bjorn Lomborg. Available at: <https://lomborg.com/> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

Despite Thunberg's activism, 'every teenage activist has to have some fun', when on her 17th birthday, she has the 'perfect excuse to dance like no-one is watching'. All very adorable, and yet we might still object. Thunberg is a political activist whose views are strong. She calls for an absolute end to the use of fossil fuels, despite the fact these are a cheap source of fuel for many – a point those on low incomes would make. She advocates a form of environmental populism that contends mainstream politicians are liars and have done nothing, speaking only 'blah blah blah'.

Here is a quotation taken from elsewhere:

*'The leaders are not doing nothing; they are actively creating loopholes and shaping frameworks to benefit themselves and to continue profiting from this destructive system. This is an active choice by the leaders to continue to let the exploitation of people and nature and the destruction of present and future living conditions to take place.'*¹⁶⁶

Her message is at times bleak and apocalyptic, 'You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.'¹⁶⁷

She has further sung publicly 'you can shove your climate crisis up your arse'.¹⁶⁸ British children are legally obliged to be in education, yet Thunberg encouraged children to be truant in order to take part in political protest. Recently, she said:

*'We are never going back to normal again because 'normal' was already a crisis. What we refer to as normal is an extreme system built on the exploitation of people and the planet. It is a system defined by colonialism, imperialism, oppression and genocide by the so-called global North to accumulate wealth that still shapes our current world order.'*¹⁶⁹

On this account, Thunberg is a radical, and possibly even a revolutionary, given she is advocating some sort of new social order. So why is a BBC Bitesize article promoting her as *just a regular kid* campaigning on climate change, without full disclosure of her political beliefs or balance?

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¹⁶⁶ Friedman, M. (2021) *Greta Thunberg's Powerful Anti-Capitalist Speech in Glasgow*. Available at: <https://www.laprogressive.com/climate-change-2/powerful-anti-capitalist-speech> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶⁷ Newsround (2019) *Greta Thunberg quotes: 10 famous lines from teen activist*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/49812183> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶⁸ *The Guardian* (2021) 'You can shove your climate crisis up your arse': Greta Thunberg sings at Cop26 – video', 2 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/video/2021/nov/02/you-can-shove-your-climate-crisis-up-your-arse-greta-thunberg-sings-at-cop26-video> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

¹⁶⁹ Chapman, B. (2022) *Greta Thunberg: West's 'oppressive and racist' capitalist system must be scrapped*. Available at: <https://www.gbnews.uk/gb-views/greta-thunberg-wests-oppressive-and-racist-capitalist-system-must-be-scrapped/383782> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

but we should make reasoned decisions, applying consistent editorial judgement, about whether to include or omit perspectives.

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Example 2. ‘The Big Read: The Extraordinary Life of Greta Thunberg by Devika Jina’¹⁷⁰

This page is presented as a school lesson aimed at those learning at home, possibly published during the Covid-19 lockdowns when schools were closed. Two videos of author Devika Jina are presented, reading from her book *The Extraordinary Life of Greta Thunberg*, followed by three ‘activities’. The page appears to have been deleted from the BBC website but is available using an internet archive site. Here is an example from Jina’s book:

‘Why should I be studying for a future that soon may be no more, when no one is doing anything to save the future? And what is the point of learning facts when the most important facts clearly mean nothing to our society?’

¹⁷⁰ BBC Bitesize, *The Big Read: The Extraordinary Life of Greta Thunberg by Devika Jina*. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200830151054/https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zbs9vwx> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

'On the morning of Monday 20th August 2018 Greta woke up, brushed her teeth and ate her breakfast. But instead of getting ready for school, she took hold of her hand-painted banner emblazoned with the words 'School strike for climate'.

Readers are then asked the following questions based on the text:

'Can you explain what a solo strike is?'

'How did social media contribute to Greta's success?'

Devika's text further adds:

'Meanwhile Greta had been invited to speak at the [United Nations Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland] conference. She thought it was funny that the people she was calling to act had invited her to speak about a problem that they weren't doing enough to resolve.'

The activities themselves include:

'Using both extracts, identify the main ideas and write a short paragraph which summarises Greta's achievements...'

'Chose an environmental issue that is important to you and write an opening for a speech to be read at a similar conference where world leaders are present.'

As already discussed, Thunberg is a radical political activist. So why was a book written ostensibly to promote her, being used by the BBC as teaching material for children? The second activity quoted above could be viewed as encouraging children into environmental activism. Yes, this article has been removed from the Bitesize website, but it is certainly revealing as to the kinds of political prejudices and editorial blind spots there are behind the scenes.

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*Example 3. 'Watch again: Are we teaching children enough about climate change?'*¹⁷¹

This page consists of a live discussion between BBC presenter Naomi Wilkinson and academic Dr Leigh Hoath, teacher Sarah Eames, and Dr Hannah-Lee Chalk (who is an 'earth scientist and learning manager' at Manchester Museum). It is the video and transcript of a live discussion broadcast on Facebook. It is part of BBC Teach.

The discussion focuses on whether enough is being taught about climate change in schools. The intended audience is teachers. The immediate objection is the lack of balance on the panel. There is no one there to say we have enough taught about climate change already, or that less might be taught, or that teaching children more alarmist accounts might be terrifying. When it is put to the panel that there is already climate change on the National Curriculum, they respond that there is not enough. When the question is, 'should we not be focusing on maths and literacy?', they argue that these should be vehicles through which climate change can be taught. Moreover, it is apparent that some of the contributors have an agenda beyond simply educating children:

'As a museum educator and not a teacher, I would suggest that it shouldn't just be about teaching, and there's something to do with offering children that really great chance to connect with nature and to value and enjoy nature, and get that kind of real sense of care and feel outraged when things are being done to nature that they don't agree with.'

'Equally I think it's also about social justice, it's about inequalities and kind of, you can't necessarily teach that, you can instil a sense of care in young children, and that's what primary children are so amazing at, that their natural reaction is to feel care and outrage about things that aren't fair. And I think that you can't necessarily teach that specifically just as a science, but equally it's about exposing children to those opportunities to be in nature and to care about other people.'

¹⁷¹ BBC Teach, *Watch again: Are we teaching children enough about climate change?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/live-lessons/teaching-children-about-climate-change/z4xchbk> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

They further talk about going beyond the National Curriculum:

'... I think we expect a lot of our primary teachers, to be experts across a whole range of subjects, so to expect them to teach things as well that are not on the national curriculum, and bearing in mind that the national curriculum is a minimum entitlement, so it is okay to go beyond that, and, you know, good teachers do do [sic] that. I think to expect them to come in with the secure knowledge around that is also quite a big ask. So, there's got to be things there about supporting the teachers in their subject development as well.'

And:

'Okay, it's not something that I do personally, but what I would say is that anything out there that incentivises engaging in things beyond the curriculum is worthwhile. I think it's really important. And certainly, what we're trying to do in teacher education is widen that net so that the students that we're preparing are aware that there's these other incentives out there and initiatives that can really help them become better educators for the children for the future.'

The panelists are clear that they are concerned not just with education but in encouraging children into environmentalist action:

'I think because of the media, and there is so much in the media about things, it can become a little bit overwhelming for children, and they think, well, what can we do? And that's where you have to, as a teacher, and as a family, bring it down to what you can actually do in your local issues. At the moment we're doing some lessons about climate detectives, where the children are looking about the clean air around our school and what they can do about trying to stop the parents from leaving their cars idling, and things like that. So, them trying to make small changes to the behaviour of their parents, I think does mean that they'll have a lot to do.'

The panellists discuss changes to government policy without challenge:

'Wilkinson: The new Welsh curriculum has four purposes, one of them is that children are ethical and informed, and environmental awareness is an aspect, says James Jones, and we'd like to ask the panel, what can the rest of the country learn?

Eames: They can, they can learn by that and actually put it in the national curriculum.

Chalk: Absolutely.

Eames: I think, as you said, sort of like it is a minimum curriculum, but the fact that they've actually got it, it's there, that it's statutory, would mean that a lot more schools would cover it and do it.

Hoath: Yeah, certainly it's something that we've talked about before, in that, the other countries, Scotland and Wales, certainly do have greater opportunities within the curriculum, which then encourages teachers to engage with it, to teach about

recycling, about waste, about energy. Those things are there in a sort of more blatant form.'

They are keen to foster behavioural change not just in children but in their parents. As they say, the children are viewed as a way to get through to adults:

'Wilkinson: We've got a comment here from a viewer. She says, "The children do take the messages home from school and start to ask questions at home and in their local community. Positive pester power. What do the panel think about that?"

Eames: We were talking about that earlier on. We were saying how to educate sort of, like, the generation that might have missed out on some of these things, is to actually talk to their children, and sort of, like, the children are then going home and sort of, like, sending those messages, yeah.'

Few people would dispute the need to educate children about climate change so long as it is fair and balanced, and eschews indoctrination. Many would feel unease about teachers manipulating children into the sorts of activism they approve of. Certainly, most would strongly object to teachers using children to try and 'pester' adults into changing how they behave. Yet, this is the line promoted by the BBC, and without challenge to teachers on this broadcast. Notably, the panellists did not disagree with each other once.

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Example 4: 'Blue Planet – Live Lesson'¹⁷²

This is a lesson on ecology and human impact filmed in a live studio presented by Naomi Wilkinson and Lizzie Daly, in front of a class of school children. It also features presenter Steve Backshall who is part of the BBC's *Blue Planet Live* programme, broadcasting from the Bahamas and swimming with sharks. The lesson covers food webs, sustainability and

¹⁷² BBC Teach, *Blue Planet – Live Lesson*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/live-lessons/blue-planet-live-lesson/zn7tkmn> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

recycling, and global warming. It is very much aimed at encouraging environmentally friendly behaviour. At one point, Backshall, when asked by a viewer, 'is it too late to stop climate change?', says: ,

'Simple answer – yes, it is. The hottest 20 years on record have been in the last 22 years. The hottest five years on record have been the last five years. So, it is happening. We cannot stop it. What we can do is try and moderate it, is try and keep it to within levels where it doesn't cause catastrophic changes around the world. The time for that is now. We have to get started now.'

Another [viewer] asks, 'have you always liked going on adventures and helping?'. Backshall answers:

'Yes, I absolutely have. I am so, so lucky in what I get to do for a job. But every single one of you can get stuck in as well. I love the fact that so many young people now are getting out there and making a difference. You know, the climate strikes. People like Bella and Greta and Anna who've gone out there and shown that one person can make a difference and that you are never too young to have a voice. I am so, so proud of all of you who are getting involved in those activities.'

This is beyond simply teaching ecology and includes the endorsement of political activism in the form of the so-called climate strikes. This is extolling direct political action which comes at the expense of class time. Bella Lack is a young climate activist.¹⁷³ Perhaps Backshall is referring to Anna Taylor, who was active in the school strikes in 2019 and was quoted in *The Guardian* saying of the strikes:

*'It goes some way to proving that young people aren't apathetic, we're passionate, articulate and we're ready to continue demonstrating the need for urgent and radical climate action.'*¹⁷⁴

Greta Thunberg has been discussed already. These young activists may be admirable, they may have right on their side, but it is not for the BBC to endorse them. Certainly, their views are contested and taking direct action against the government to influence policy, which is what the strikes entailed, at the expense of learning, is not something the BBC should be taking sides on.

Backshall's statements on climate change itself reflect what is a consensus view, disputed by a minority, but would likely be in breach of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines on impartiality, which say: 'our reporting should not use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact or self-evident.'

¹⁷³ Moshakis, A. (2022) 'What's the alternative? To give up?': Bella Lack, the new queen of green', *The Observer*, 14 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/14/whats-the-alternative-to-give-up-environmentalist-bella-lack-the-new-queen-of-green> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁷⁴ Taylor, M. et al (2019) 'School pupils call for radical climate action in UK-wide strike', *The Guardian*, 15 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/15/uk-climate-change-strike-school-pupils-children-environment-protest> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

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4.3.15 There are some issues which may seem to be without controversy, appearing to be backed by a broad or even unanimous consensus of opinion. Nevertheless, they may present a significant risk to the BBC’s impartiality. In such cases, we should continue to report where the consensus lies and give it due weight. However, even if it may be neither necessary nor appropriate to seek out voices of opposition, our reporting should not use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact or self-evident.

4.3.17 The BBC must remain independent and distanced from government initiatives, campaigners, charities and their agendas, no matter how apparently worthy the cause or how much their message appears to be accepted or uncontroversial.

4. Muslims and Islam

*Example 1: How are Muslims represented in the media?*¹⁷⁵

This article presents a short film that looks at how Muslims and Islam are represented in the media. As the article states, ‘the question of whether Islam is celebrated and represented fairly in the media, remains.’ But it is not the place of the media to ‘celebrate’ Islam or any other religion for that matter and it is wrong to pretend otherwise, especially to a young audience.

The article is heavily reliant on a 2021 report from the Centre of Media Monitoring, which is an adjunct of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). That is a campaign organisation which was ostracised by the Labour government in 2009, a policy continued under subsequent governments. A 2015 official report by Sir John Jenkins found:

‘In the 1990s the Muslim Brotherhood and their associates established public facing and apparently national organisations in the UK to promote their views. None were openly identified with the Muslim Brotherhood and membership of the Muslim Brotherhood remained (and still remains) a secret. But for some years the Muslim Brotherhood shaped the new Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), dominated the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and played an important role in establishing and then running the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). MAB became politically active, notably

¹⁷⁵ BBC Bitesize, *How are Muslims represented in the media?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zv9tywx> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

in connection with Palestine and Iraq, and promoted candidates in national and local elections. The MCB sought and obtained a dialogue with Government...

*'In 2009 the then government suspended dialogue with the MCB after an office holder signed a public document which appeared to condone violence against any country supporting an arms blockade against Gaza. There has been no substantive dialogue since then between any part of the Brotherhood in the UK and Government.'*¹⁷⁶

The same report found that the MCB, along with the MAB, had 'consistently opposed programmes by successive Governments to prevent terrorism'. Many will wonder why this organisation's reports are presented by BBC Bitesize as authoritative and passed without scrutiny.

The article describes the MCB publication as a 'landmark report' which found 'almost 60 per cent of online media articles and 47 per cent of television clips associate Muslims and/or Islam with negative aspects of behaviour'. Furthermore, the accompanying film repeats the MCB claim that '[a]lmost one in ten articles misrepresent Muslims and/or Islam' and that 'right-leaning and religious publications have the highest proportion of articles which misrepresent Muslim behaviours or beliefs.' A series of headlines 'cited in the report' then flash up. But tracking those headlines down proves the articles in question are balanced and matters of legitimate public interest. What follows are the headlines:

- "ISLAMIC TAKEOVER' New National Union of Students [NUS] leader once said she would like to 'oppress white people'" – this headline was from a 2019 article in *The Sun*, concerning the then new president of the NUS and some unwise things she said on Twitter back in 2012, when she would have been around 17. The remarks are not denied by her, and she is given the opportunity to explain they were 'taken out of context' at a time when she was 'struggling' with her worldview. Being outspoken when young is nothing new, but there is nevertheless a legitimate public interest in knowing what a woman elected to a prominent public position has said just a few years ago, especially if it includes calls to 'oppress white people'.¹⁷⁷
- 'The European Church is sleeping while Islam is creeping in, says African bishop' – this comes from *Christian Today* in 2018. It is an account of what Andrew Nkea Fuanya, who is the Bishop of Mamfe in Cameroon, told the synod on young people in Rome. He warns 'Europe is being Islamized, and it will affect Africa', as well as that the Church is straying from religious teachings and that a liberal approach to homosexuality 'won't go down in Africa.' His words may be

¹⁷⁶ UK Government (2015) *Muslim Brotherhood Review: Main Findings*. Available at: www.gov.uk (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁷⁷ Burrows, T. (2019) "ISLAMIC TAKEOVER' New National Union of Students leader once said she would like to 'oppress white people'", *The Sun*, 11 April. Available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8837586/new-national-union-of-students-leader-once-said-she-would-like-to-oppress-white-people/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

controversial to some, but that is all the more reason why they should be reported.¹⁷⁸

- ‘Terrorists fool prison staff into believing they have changed’ – this is the headline of an article published in *The Times* in 2020. It reports on an academic report published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, based at King’s College London. The report says that terrorist prisoners are pretending to reform their characters in cases of ‘false compliance’, which can be a ‘major issue in relation to risk assessment and release arrangements’. The report notes that the terrorist Usman Khan took part in a rehabilitation scheme before he murdered two people. Those he killed were running such a scheme, which Khan had participated in. *The Times* was reporting on a well-credentialed academic study with obvious public interest.¹⁷⁹
- ‘Muslim-only swimming pools and university ‘safe spaces’ all BANNED: The radical changes that could be coming to Sydney VERY soon’ – this is taken from *Daily Mail Australia* in 2018. It reports on remarks made by Mark Latham, who was seeking election to the New South Wales Parliament at the time, and stood a realistic chance of election. He was proposing ‘creating a new criminal offence’ for segregating people according to race, gender sexuality or religion in public places, in particular ‘segregated municipal swimming pools’. Latham had campaigned against curtains put up around a swimming pool in Auburn, where 43 per cent of residents are Muslim. He had taken issue with so-called ‘safe space’ policies at university. All this is of legitimate public interest to Australians, since it is reportage on a politician. Notably, the headline has been altered so that it now says ‘Segregated swimming pools’, not ‘Muslim-only’ – which may have been the point of contention.¹⁸⁰
- ‘The BRITISH [sic] hotels propped-up by Islamic torture – Celebs call for mass boycott’ – taken from *The Daily Express* in 2019. This article reports on a celebrity boycott of luxury British hotels owned by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei. This came in response to the introduction of death by stoning for gay sex as well as insulting or defaming Mohammed. George Clooney is quoted as saying:
‘every single time we stay at or take meetings at or dine at any of these nine hotels we are putting money directly into the pockets of men who choose to stone and whip to death their own citizens for being gay or accused of adultery.’

¹⁷⁸ Christian Today (2018) *The European Church is sleeping while Islam is creeping in, says African bishop*. Available at: <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-european-church-is-sleeping-while-islam-is-creeping-in-says-african-bishop/130784.htm> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁷⁹ Gardham, D. and Hamilton, F. (2020) ‘Terrorists fool prison staff into believing they have changed’, *The Times*, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/terrorists-fool-prison-staff-into-believing-they-have-changed-rb6tt0s66> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, S. (2018) ‘Segregated swimming pools and university ‘safe spaces’ all BANNED: The radical changes that could be coming to Sydney VERY soon’, *Daily Mail Australia*, 22 November. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6416753/One-Nation-candidate-Mark-Latham-wants-ban-Segregated-swimming-pools-university-safe-spaces.html> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

The headline for this article has since been altered to read ‘The British hotels owned by Sultan of Brunei...’ but nevertheless it is clear the impetus for the laws, which included prohibiting ‘exposing Muslim children to the beliefs and practices of any religion besides Islam’, was Islamic. Thus, it would seem fair to say this report was of legitimate public interest concerning well-known public figures as well as the wicked laws of Brunei.¹⁸¹

At heart there is, in this Bitesize article in question, a fundamental misunderstanding. Most news is negative and, given the existence of Islamic extremism, often Muslims in the news will be there for the wrong reasons but with good reason, as seen in the above examples. The Bitesize article says:

‘Representation matters. It is important for all people, of all backgrounds to see themselves properly represented – online, in the news or on TV and film. The media we consume can have a big influence on what we think, our beliefs and how we interact with and perceive others.’

The problem here is there is a trade-off between positive portrayal and censorship. In effect this BBC Bitesize article is saying to the young that they must not tolerate coverage of the bad things some Muslims do, as well as the oppressive nature of many Islamist regimes. All this is based on the uncritical regurgitation of a dubious report by an organisation which presents a misleading view that the media, and the conservative media in particular, is hostile to Muslims. This is not to say there is no hostility, but the evidence presented by BBC Bitesize is unconvincing.

Possible violations of BBC Editorial Guidelines:

4.3.12 We should not automatically assume that contributors from other organisations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities and think-tanks) are unbiased. Appropriate information about their affiliations, funding and particular viewpoints should be made available to the audience, when relevant to the context.

4.3.17 The BBC must remain independent and distanced from government initiatives, campaigners, charities and their agendas, no matter how apparently worthy the cause or how much their message appears to be accepted or uncontroversial.

5. Social justice

Example 1. ‘What is equality and social justice?’¹⁸²

This page is aimed at pupils at Key Stage 3 (ages 11 to 14). It aims to teach what is meant by the political concepts of ‘equality’ and ‘social justice’. As the article states, ‘equality is when each person is seen as equal in the eyes of the law.’ ‘Social justice’ is when ‘each person can

¹⁸¹ Ferguson, E. (2019) ‘The BRITISH hotels owned by Sultan of Brunei – Celebs call for mass boycott’, *Daily Express*, 4 April. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1109825/brunei-hotels-boycott-george-clooney-sultan-of-brunei> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁸² BBC Bitesize, *What is equality and social justice?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/znbrpg8/articles/z42khhbk> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

exercise their rights within a society'. Furthermore, a 'government that promotes social justice ensures that everyone has physical security, education, healthcare, and employment'.

A short animation is presented in which three cartoon characters go to a football match, only the tall one can see over the wall separating the crowd from the pitch just fine, while the middle one can just about see, and the short one cannot see at all. We are told they are all equal but it is not fair. Then a steward offers the little one a big box to stand on and the middle one a small box, so that all blob people have the same view. It is no longer equal, we are told, 'but it is fair'.

Some groups of people do not receive fair treatment, we are told, they are 'victims of discrimination'. Women, racial minorities, refugees, gays and transexuals, and the disabled are all victims. 'What can be done?' asks the Bitesize article, regarding social injustice and inequality:

'Society can fix these problems by using 'positive discrimination' to right the wrongs these groups suffer. This is when a particular group is given special privileges to compensate for a perceived disadvantage.'

'The government can offer employment programmes, housing benefits, and education opportunities to these groups to create social equality.'

'Positive discrimination' is illegal under the Equality Act 2010.¹⁸³ In any case, this is highly contentious and ideological thinking, while there is a wealth of evidence to show affirmative action programmes do not work.¹⁸⁴ No government anywhere has successfully engineered group-level equality of outcomes.

The article continues to point out 'your role in promoting social equality', with 'young people who demonstrate social responsibility in the community' setting an example to their peers. Tips for promoting social equality are offered to the article's young audience including 'fundraising, organising or participating in campaigns to address a community issue'. This is encouraging young people into political 'social justice' activism. The article is pure leftist political ideology without any criticism or evidence to back it up. Critiques from the right, that 'social justice' is a vacuous and nebulous term which ultimately comes to justify gross political inequality and an end to freedom, are not entertained.

Possible violations of BBC Editorial Guidelines:

4.3.3 There may be occasions when the omission of views or other material could jeopardise impartiality. There is no view on any subject which must be excluded as a matter of principle, but we should make reasoned decisions, applying consistent editorial judgement, about whether to include or omit perspectives.

¹⁸³ Jarett, T. (2011) *The Equality Act 2010 and positive action*, House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁸⁴ Sowell, T. (2004) *Affirmative Action around the World*. Available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/affirmative-action-around-world> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

5. 'LGBT'

*Example 1. What is the difference between sexuality and gender?*¹⁸⁵

This page on the Bitesize website outlines the differences between sexuality and 'gender identity'. Sexuality, we are told, describes 'the sexual feelings we experience towards other people'. It is 'deeply personal', does not necessarily relate to 'who we actually have sex with' and readers are assured not to worry if they do not know what their sexuality might be.

'Gender identity' is not defined explicitly, only we are told there are some people 'registered' as male who do not identity as male, as well as those 'registered' female who do not identity as female. Others' 'gender identity' is neither male or female and may be described, according to the article, as 'gender diverse' or 'non-binary'. As the article states, opinion on this matter is 'wide-ranging' and contentious. Readers are encouraged to 'take time to work through your feelings and find what is right for you', regardless of societal expectation.

These ideas are indeed contentious, and this article can be criticised for encouraging children with gender dysphoria down the path of affirmation when often the root cause pertains to other underlying psychological issues. As is stated, 'Your journey is a personal one and has nothing to do with anyone who you don't invite along with you.'

The article conflates 'interference' with 'discrimination', but the effect of this may be to encourage children to ignore guidance or counselling, or even their own parents, that might be more beneficial than, say, risky hormonal and surgical interventions. This article is presenting contentious ideas that are innovations, as though they were normal, and then encouraging children to ignore any objections. Should they encounter such 'discrimination', then a list of organisations they can turn to is presented at the end of the article.

They are:

1. Cara-Friend – this organisation offers a helpline for young people, including 'trans specific youth services'. It runs a scheme similar to LGBT charity Stonewall's *Diversity Champions*, as well as campaigning and lobbying on things like gay marriage and 'conversion therapy'.¹⁸⁶
2. LGBT Northern Ireland – this is described as a 'portal' for gay and transgender people. Clicking through on the link takes you to a website where a list of organisations is presented, including the charity Mermaids.¹⁸⁷ At time of writing, the latter is under investigation by the Charity Commission after safeguarding concerns were raised.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ BBC Bitesize, *What is the difference between sexuality and gender?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zhvbt39/articles/z6smbdm> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁸⁶ Cara-Friend. Available at: <https://cara-friend.org.uk/#> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁸⁷ LGBTQIA+ in Northern Ireland. Available at: <https://lgbtni.org/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁸⁸ The Charity Commission (2022) *Regulator announces statutory inquiry into Mermaids*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulator-announces-statutory-inquiry-into-mermaids> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

3. The Rainbow Project – This organisation is ‘devoted to improving the health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ people and their families in Northern Ireland’.¹⁸⁹ It provides advice on how to access surgical interventions¹⁹⁰ as well as how to wear a chest-binder ‘safely’.¹⁹¹ This organisation also offers advice on group sex and ‘chem sex’, meaning sex while under the influence of drugs (including ‘Methamphetamine (Crystal Meth), Mephedrone (Meth), GHB and GBL (G).’)¹⁹² It further partners with Stonewall in delivering its *Diversity Champions* scheme in Northern Ireland.¹⁹³ It lists both Stonewall and Mermaids as ‘support organisations’.¹⁹⁴ The Rainbow Project seeks to influence ‘policy by lobbying policymakers in constructive and concerted campaigns’.¹⁹⁵
4. Transgender NI – described as a ‘human rights and community organisation for trans and gender diverse people in Northern Ireland’. It focuses on ‘public campaigns, strategic policy and community development, while providing support to other organisations that need it’. Its website links to Mermaids’ Northern Ireland Facebook page.¹⁹⁶

These organisations tend to be involved in political campaigning, associated with controversial policies adopted by some charities, and appear to take a particular approach to transgenderism, namely at times to encourage affirmation. This may be the correct approach for some, but there are others such as Keira Bell, for whom this proved disastrous as a child.¹⁹⁷ The BBC Bitesize article, which is aimed at Key Stage 3 pupils (ages 11-14), is endorsing organisations that take a politically partisan role in a contentious debate while also potentially exposing young and troubled individuals to dangerous ideas and behaviours. While the tone of the article overall is moderate, it rests on ‘affirmative’ assumptions and does not include any sceptical voices.

Possible violations of BBC Editorial Guidelines:

4.3.6 When dealing with ‘controversial subjects’, we must ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight and prominence, particularly when the controversy is active. Opinion should be clearly distinguished from fact

4.3.7 We must take particular care to achieve due impartiality when a ‘controversial subject’ may be considered to be a major matter. ‘Major matters’ are usually matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy that are of national or international importance, or of a similar significance within a smaller coverage area. When dealing with ‘major matters’, or

¹⁸⁹ The Rainbow Project, *About Us*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/about-us/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹⁰ The Rainbow Project, *Trans Healthcare NHS and Private*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/trans-healthcare-nhs-and-private/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹¹ The Rainbow Project, *Safe Binding Advice*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/safe-binding-and-packing/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹² The Rainbow Project, *What is Chemsex?* Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/what-is-chem-sex/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹³ The Rainbow Project, *Diversity Champions programme*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/diversity-champions-programme/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹⁴ The Rainbow Project, *Trans and non-binary support organisations*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/trans-and-non-binary-support-organisations/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹⁵ The Rainbow Project, *About Us*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-project.org/about-us/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹⁶ Transgender NI. *Welcome to Transgender NI*. Available at: <https://transgenderni.org.uk/> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹⁷ Bell, K. (2021) *Keira Bell: My Story*. Available at: <https://www.persuasion.community/p/keira-bell-my-story> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

when the issues involved are highly controversial and/or a decisive moment in the controversy is expected, it will normally be necessary to ensure that an appropriately wide range of significant views are reflected in a clearly linked ‘series of programmes’, a single programme or web item, or sometimes even a single item in a programme.

4.3.9 Where BBC online sites covering ‘controversial subjects’ offer links to external sites, we should try to ensure that the information on those external sites, taken together, represents a reasonable range of views about the subject.

4.3.19 Social action output can form an important part of the BBC’s public service. However, care is required to ensure the BBC sets its own social action agenda and decides its own priorities:

we must ensure that our output does not simply embrace the agenda of any particular campaign groups or charities and that we treat groups objectively and do not favour one above another...

Example 2. The evolution of LGBT+ History Month¹⁹⁸

This BBC Bitesize article is about ‘LGBT+ History Month’ and rests principally on an interview with Sue Sanders, who is its co-founder as well as a ‘LGBT rights activist’.¹⁹⁹ The event runs throughout February and its organisers provide ‘teaching resources’ to schools.²⁰⁰ The aim is to “‘usualise” LGBT life’. A talk given at the British Academy is mentioned that ‘focuses on making sporting activity more open to the trans and non-binary and non-binary athletes [sic]’ after ‘swimmers from a transgender group in Bournemouth reported negative experience’. The objections to males competing in female sport, as made by Sharon Davies and Martina Navratilova among others, are not given any airing.

We further learn Stonewall has been involved in the History Month with an interview given to the organisation’s director of campaigns, policy and research. We learn the organisation has a ‘separate programme where teachers can be trained to deter bullying’. The representative says she hopes to see ‘LGBT+ life’ addressed in schools beyond sex education lessons, including in maths lessons. As she says:

‘For example, a maths problem where someone is out shopping with their two mums, they buy five apples and two oranges – how much change have they got left from their fiver? There’s a lot that we can do.’

This article serves as an advert for campaigning activists who wish to see an agenda spread throughout schools to normalise certain ideas and practices, as the quote above attests. The fact that moderate LGBT-friendly interventions in schools in Birmingham provoked outrage

¹⁹⁸ BBC Bitesize, *The evolution of LGBT+ History Month*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zhbbvk7> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

¹⁹⁹ The National Archives, *Sanders, Sue, (b 1947), LGBT rights activist*. Available at: <https://discovery-cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F281131> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²⁰⁰ BBC Bitesize, *The evolution of LGBT+ History Month*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zhbbvk7> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

from Muslim parents would show that not all parties favour such things.²⁰¹ Where is the religious conservative voice, or any hint of balance for that matter, in this article?

Possible violations of BBC Editorial Guidelines:

4.3.3 There may be occasions when the omission of views or other material could jeopardise impartiality. There is no view on any subject which must be excluded as a matter of principle, but we should make reasoned decisions, applying consistent editorial judgement, about whether to include or omit perspectives.

4.3.12 We should not automatically assume that contributors from other organisations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities and think-tanks) are unbiased. Appropriate information about their affiliations, funding and particular viewpoints should be made available to the audience, when relevant to the context.

4.3.17 The BBC must remain independent and distanced from government initiatives, campaigners, charities and their agendas, no matter how apparently worthy the cause or how much their message appears to be accepted or uncontroversial.

4.3.18 Careful thought will be necessary to ensure perceptions of the BBC's impartiality are maintained when content is scheduled topically and coincides with a third party's campaign or initiative. It is advisable to contact Editorial Policy.

4.3.19 Social action output can form an important part of the BBC's public service. However, care is required to ensure the BBC sets its own social action agenda and decides its own priorities:

we must ensure that our output does not simply embrace the agenda of any particular campaign groups or charities and that we treat groups objectively and do not favour one above another...

Summary

If there is one thread running through all these examples, it may be the belief in the political activist, which can be defined as someone who operates outside of conventional political orthodoxy or institutions in order to bring about change. These examples all seem to either rely on political activists, praise and endorse them, fail to challenge their views, or present a sanitised version of them. Indeed, the Bitesize website has a page for Key Stage 1 pupils – the youngest aged five to seven – that encourages them to 'Be an astonishing activist!' It gives a list of examples that includes Nelson Mandela, Emmeline Pankhurst, Rosa Parks, and, er... Guy Fawkes.²⁰² The inclusion of Guy Fawkes, who was a terrorist and would-be assassin

²⁰¹ Parveen, N. (2019) 'Birmingham school stops LGBT lessons after parents protest', *The Guardian*, 4 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/04/birmingham-school-stops-lgbt-lessons-after-parent-protests> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²⁰² BBC Bitesize, *History KS1 - Back in time with... Astonishing Activists*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zn3vvk7/articles/zh7m8hv> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

as well as religious fanatic who tried to kill the King along with everyone else in parliament, is troubling but perhaps beside the point.

It is easy to admire at times the political activist, since, more often than not, they have moral indignation on their side. But the art of actual politics, that of getting things done, is less glamorous and often entails slightly murky political compromises. This is hard work and entails personal costs that those who harangue the elected government from the margins, on protest rallies and so on, never have to bear. Moreover, unlike most political activists, there is the not inconsiderable task of seeking consent at the ballot box. Thus, there is concern that the BBC is encouraging young people into political activism, especially its radical strain, when instead it might better prepare them for greater economic flourishing and democratic political life. It seems the BBC is promoting a style of politics that puts children on a course for conflict rather than one of compromise.

We have seen, presented without contest, endorsements of radical political ideas and activism as well as sanitised portrayals of extremists. These examples represent numerous violations of BBC Editorial Guidelines on impartiality and were they used in classrooms, they would likely face questions of legality. That some of these articles have started to disappear from the BBC's website would point towards the fact of others already having noticed these breaches of impartiality and starting to complain. We can expect to see many more vanish in a similar fashion.

Conclusion

As has been argued, the BBC has a bias in favour of certain political ideas that might be termed radical progressivism, as well as failed in its duty to reflect and represent all sections of British society as best it can. In taking steps to correct its 'class imbalance', it tacitly admits to its own problem of failing to meet its vital standard of impartiality. Given it is funded through something akin to taxation, it is in the bind of 'taxation without representation' and its leadership is desperate to correct this in order to preserve the BBC's privileged position as the national broadcaster, propped up by the licence fee. Others though strongly disagree and view the correctives to restore impartiality as an attempt to assert Tory dominance over the BBC. It remains up to Tim Davie and his supporters to convince them otherwise.

The BBC has a right to provide educational materials, which are often of excellent quality, particularly when they stay close to school curriculums. But its content aimed at schools escapes scrutiny since all eyes tend to be trained on its flagship news productions. This report has unearthed evidence showing a lack of 'due impartiality' in many incidences and it is suspected this is merely the tip of the iceberg. All too often, the content produced has been reliant on divisive political activists who are presented as reasonable, palatable, and mainstream. Indeed, the BBC's educational ethos seems underwritten by an undue faith in the cult of the political activist, especially the radical, at the expense of extolling conventional democratic politics based on electoral consent and compromise. One of the hallmarks of Mao's Cultural Revolution during the 1960s was the politicisation of the young, turning them into fanatical activists who would tear apart society's institutions along with severely punishing their elders who thought or did supposedly the wrong thing. The comparison here is extreme and inexact, but nevertheless there is a warning from history as to what happens when you politicise the young.

This report has solely focused on the BBC educational websites Bitesize and Teach. Lurking away on the BBC's website though are other streams of content where the fixation is firmly on the cherished ideas of the radical progressive left, that encompasses gender and racial equality, as well as the recent vogue political innovation of gender identity and fluidity. The BBC Equality Matters,²⁰³ BBC Future,²⁰⁴ and BBC Culture²⁰⁵ pages are all worthy of further critical scrutiny. These come across as little fiefdoms on the BBC website, where the prevailing cultural elite pretty much has its way, while the small 'c' conservative tastes of the majority are ignored. As the BBC struggles to understand populism, it would do well to consider the extent to which it has provoked it.

²⁰³ BBC, *Equality Matters*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/equality-matters> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²⁰⁴ BBC Future. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²⁰⁵ BBC Culture. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/tags/identities> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

Recommendations

There are two fundamental recommendations that flow from this conclusion:

- The BBC needs to go over its Bitesize and Teach content, along with other online content, and cull any biased or contentious material presented without 'due impartiality'. Bitesize needs to be refocused as a revision aid where it so often excels.
- The government needs to look again at the BBC's special 'art, journalism, or literature' clause as it pertains to the Freedom of Information Act, since its interpretation is so wide as to encompass almost anything – meaning the BBC is opaque and escaping public scrutiny in a way no other public body can. A new balance should be struck between protecting things like confidentiality of journalistic sources and a public right to know, among other things, how public money is spent and who the BBC partners with.

Appendix

A request under the Freedom of Information Act was put to the BBC asking,

- 1) What the annual expenditure and budget were for Bitesize and BBC Teach in the last five years?
- 2) How much money the BBC has made through the selling of Bitesize materials (books, films etc.)?
- 3) What the rules are for recruiting historians, scientists, or educationalists to write Bitesize content?
- 4) Which external academics and institutions have contributed material in the last five years?

Questions 1, 3, and 4 were refused under a special exemption the BBC has, whereby information ‘held for the purposes of art, journalism or literature’ is not covered by the Act.²⁰⁶ The BBC interprets this as liberally as possible to deny basic information about how public money is spent from becoming public knowledge. Whatever the BBC says is ‘art, journalism, or literature’ is exempt and it does not offer a right of internal review. For example, an unrelated request was made to the BBC to find out how many times each regular pundit appeared on *Match of the Day*. This is ‘art, journalism, or literature’ according to the BBC.²⁰⁷

Such an approach has been affirmed by both the Supreme Court and the Information Commissioner’s Office.²⁰⁸ We have been prevented from finding out how much public money the BBC spends on Bitesize and Teach as well as who it partners with. There is a clear public interest yet we are not permitted to know. This is the same BBC that preaches the virtue of ‘transparency in action’.²⁰⁹

Question 2 was refused on grounds that the BBC subsidiaries are not covered by the Act.

A further request to the BBC was made, asking how many Freedom of Information (FoI) requests had been made to the BBC for each of the last 10 years, along with the number rejected under the ‘art, journalism or literature’ get out clause. The data obtained are presented below.²¹⁰ Over 10 years, almost half (46 per cent) of FoI requests were rejected on

²⁰⁶ BBC’s response to Richard Norrie’s FoI request. WhatDoTheyKnow (2023). Available at: <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/959586/response/2288057/attach/html/4/RFI20230424%20Response%20to%20your%20FOI%20request.pdf.html> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²⁰⁷ BBC’s response to Richard Norrie’s FoI request. WhatDoTheyKnow (2023). Available at: <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/959111/response/2278943/attach/html/4/RFI20230407%20FOI%20Response.pdf.html> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

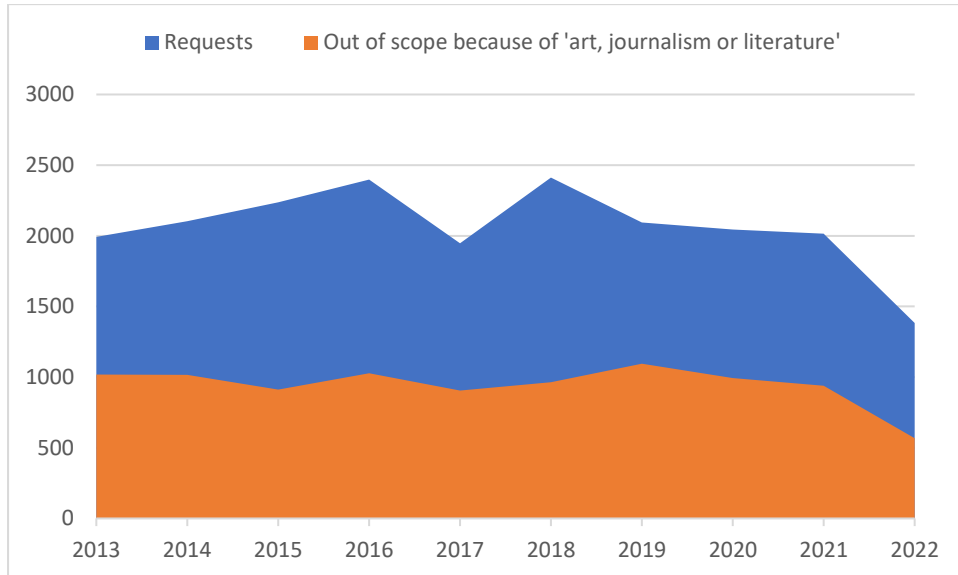
²⁰⁸ ICO (2016) *Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) Decision notice*. Available at: <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2016/1623877/fs50619998.pdf> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²⁰⁹ BBC Media Centre (2023) *BBC News puts transparency at its heart with BBC Verify*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/bbc-news-transparency-bbc-verify> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

²¹⁰ BBC’s response to Richard Norrie’s FoI request. WhatDoTheyKnow (2023). Available at: <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/983389/response/2341254/attach/html/4/RFI20230738%20Response.pdf.html> (Accessed: 25 July 2023).

these grounds. The BBC said, 'where appropriate the BBC aims to volunteer information outside the scope of the Act'.²¹¹

Figure 1. FoI requests made to the BBC, along with rejections due to 'art, journalism or literature'



Source: BBC.

²¹¹ Ibid.



Dr. Richard Norrie (former director of the statistics and policy research programme at Civitas) examines bias and impartiality within BBC Bitesize and BBC Teach, the organisation's educational output aimed at younger audiences.

In this Civitas publication, Dr. Norrie uncovers examples of articles on the BBC's educational websites that have potentially breached the corporation's own Editorial Guidelines. According to Dr. Norrie, this content tends to 'escapes scrutiny since all eyes tend to be trained on its flagship news productions.'

These articles cover sensitive and often controversial topics such as Britain's role in the slave trade, as well as race and gender issues. Dr. Norrie criticises the BBC for providing a platform for 'activists' whose views are presented without challenge.

The author claims the educational ethos of the BBC appears to be 'underwritten by an undue faith in the cult of the political activist, especially the radical, at the expense of extolling conventional democratic politics based on electoral consent and compromise.'

In evidence uncovered in this publication, BBC educational output seems to be pushing young people towards political activism and fails in its duty to present controversial topics with balance.

Dr. Norrie recommends that the BBC reverts to focusing on revision aides, which 'are often of an excellent quality', with the sole purpose of helping young people do well in their education. This publication concludes by calling on the BBC to go over its online content and 'cull any biased or contentious material presented without 'due impartiality'.'