

Impartiality Guidance

In one sense defining impartiality is easy. It means reflecting all sides of arguments and not favouring any side.

But putting impartiality in practice is more difficult. The Editorial Guidelines set out the BBC's fundamental approach to impartiality. They are more demanding than the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, reflecting the audience and stakeholder expectations of the BBC. Both codes require due impartiality, which means that the demands of impartiality can vary: "The term 'due' means that the impartiality must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation". (*Editorial Guidelines 2019*: [4.1](#)) The Guidelines say "News in whatever form must be treated with due impartiality..." (*Editorial Guidelines 2019*: [4.3.10](#)). And the BBC Guidelines demand the highest level of impartiality in News and Current Affairs and factual journalism (including sport) and reflect the Ofcom Code's requirements in relation to controversial subjects¹ and major matters². But the impartiality due will vary in other forms of output: it is not expected, for example, that the same requirement will apply to comedy or drama or a range of other output.

Impartiality should never been seen as a restriction, or as an inconvenience or anachronism. Accuracy, evidence, facts, transparency and informed judgements are constituent parts of an impartial approach. They define a professional discipline which helps journalists make difficult judgements and sets the BBC apart from polarised debate and the current oversupply of opinion and comment. Impartiality properly understood can support those confronted with difficult editorial judgements which can be particularly complex when dealing with causes which drive towards moral judgements.

The Guidelines allow senior journalists to provide professional judgements, rooted in evidence, but they make clear that the audience should not be able to tell, from BBC output, "...the personal opinions of our journalists or news and current affairs presenters on matters of public policy, political or industrial

¹ Controversial subjects may be a matter of public policy or political or industrial controversy. It may also be a controversy within religion, science, finance, culture or ethics or any other matter.

² 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 in a smaller coverage area.

controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area.” (*Editorial Guidelines 2019: 4.3.11*). The BBC does not allow the expression of personal views by its news and current affairs presenters and reporters and journalists other than in exceptional and defined circumstances. But views or opinions expressed elsewhere, on social media or in articles or books, can also give the impression of bias or prejudice and must also be avoided. In general nothing should be said publicly by BBC journalists that could not be said on air or on BBC platforms.

Personal views are not the same as eyewitness accounts, evidence based assessments or professional judgements.

Democratic Values

The Guidelines also make clear that the BBC’s impartiality is not value free and that it incorporates the values of a democratic society. The Editorial Guidelines say that “...our editorial standards do not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles.” (*Editorial Guidelines 2019: 1.2*)

Fundamental democratic principles include the right to vote, freedom of expression and the rule of law and encompass the assumption that societal discrimination based on race, colour or creed or gender will undermine these essential elements of democracy. So the approach BBC reporters and presenters take will always reflect an assumption that the democratic path will be better than repression, corruption, discrimination and the restriction of these rights. But the factual reporting of events should remain accurate and objective.

So, for example, when the BBC says it is “not impartial on racism” it does not mean that instances of racial discrimination will be reported in an inaccurate or biased way. It does mean that the underlying approach to racism is that it is wrong and that discrimination, if tolerated, undermines democratic values.

In this context it is important to understand that what constitutes racism can itself be controversial, and can depend on context and circumstances. A particular statement about immigration, for example, might be interpreted by some as racist whilst others might see it as a straightforward policy issue. The terms of the debate can sometimes be couched in racist language: “go back to where you came from” directed at ethnic minorities or immigrants is generally recognised as a racist term and can be reported in that light. Racist abuse and

racist descriptors are often straightforwardly identifiable. But other terms may be more dependent on motive and context. In these circumstances we should aim to describe events, and the reaction to them, rather than imposing judgments that might make us part of the story on which we are seeking to report. In summary, care needs to be taken before describing terms as racist or ascribing racist motives, eg. in describing someone as a racist.

Lived Experience

The lived experience of reporters and presenters can be a relevant and even telling part of the story. For example, Caroline Wyatt recently reported on the drugs that can help her fight against MS. And Frank Gardner reported on his experience as a wheel chair user of trying to disembark from an aeroplane at Heathrow.

Personal reporting may involve lived experience which is encountered as a consequence of identity. The context of any such reporting is important. Longer-form programmes or individual items on a specific subject may be more appropriate: such reporting should generally be signposted to the audience in advance.

The BBC tries to reflect the lived experience of all communities as part of its output. So the most important contribution lived experience can make to output is through the identification of stories or content which reflect that experience.

Professional judgements, evidence-based assessment

Specialist correspondents and senior editors may have the licence to use their professional judgement and make evidence based assessments as part of BBC content. The Guidelines describe them as “professional judgements, rooted in evidence”. (*Editorial Guidelines 2019*: [4.3.11](#)) For example, the Political Editor may be able to suggest why a particular politician has acted in a certain way, or how they expect political developments to unfold; the North America editor may be able to ascribe motive to the President of the United States based on information or evidence they have gathered and using their professional experience to assess the situation. But this permission will not apply generally and depends on seniority and experience. These evidence based judgements should not be confused with expressions of personal opinion or personal prejudices. Evidence based judgements will be

dispassionate assessments not emotional reactions to opinions, behaviour or circumstances.

Presenters and reporters should avoid the dangers of imputing motive or taking sides in areas of contention, even those relating to identity or lived experience. It may be more appropriate to report on the reaction of a wider community of which they may form a part, eg. “the x community, of which I am a part, is angered/upset by” etc.

Public Expressions of Opinion

The Guidelines say that “Presenters, reporters and correspondents . . . can have a significant impact on perceptions of whether due impartiality has been achieved”. (Editorial Guidelines 2019: [4.3.11](#))

Opinion can be revealed, however, in more ways than simply expressing a particular view; for instance, by lines of questioning over time, by tone of voice, facial or body language, by how an interviewer or presenter reacts when a particular opinion is expressed. These can be a manifestation of bias revealing – or appearing to reveal – a personal opinion or prejudice.

The Guidelines say: “The public expression by staff and presenters of personal offence or indignation, or the tone or attitude of an item or programme as a whole may jeopardise the BBC’s impartiality.” (*Editorial Guidelines 2019*: [4.3.14](#))

Additional Responsibility of working for the BBC

The BBC’s impartiality requirements do not apply only to broadcast output and published content. An array of social media outlets, for example, present opportunities for the public expression of viewpoints by presenters, reporters and other staff which could jeopardise the BBC’s impartiality. Whilst there may be greater freedom for BBC freelance employees who are not engaged in news or current affairs or factual journalism output and who are not primarily identified with the BBC, it is essential that those engaged in the production of news and current affairs and factual journalism in particular say nothing publicly which could be interpreted as bias on politics or public policy issues, or controversial issues. Those who appear on screen or on the radio in particular may be identified with the BBC: it is easy to damage the perception of the BBC’s impartiality through careless statements made off air. (See Social Media guidance: <https://bbc.com/editorialguidelines/documents/social-media.pdf> .)

Impartiality is a core BBC value so everyone who works for the BBC in any capacity should always consider whether their actions, either professional or personal, might risk causing damage to perceptions of the BBC's impartiality.

Campaigns

Corporately the BBC is allowed to have policies but the BBC is not a campaigning organisation.

The Impartiality section of the Editorial Guidelines on Campaigns and Initiatives says:

"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." ([4.3.17](#))

Campaigns frequently advocate for legitimate social or policy change. However, the BBC must retain its independence in relation to them. To take just one example, the debate about what should be done with statues and street names honouring slave traders and others associated with racism. There are a range of views on such issues, many starting from a position of opposing racism.

While the BBC does not join or endorse campaigns, it does have a responsibility to raise awareness of important issues. This is done both through our journalism, which has, for example, often highlighted injustice in the UK and around the world, and through wider content and programming.

Participating in marches or protests

The Editorial Guidelines sections on Impartiality and Conflicts of Interest make it clear that different considerations apply depending on what you do for the BBC, your visibility and your seniority.

Members of staff outside news and current affairs and factual journalism may attend marches, demonstrations and protests as private individuals.

These BBC staff are also able to participate in some parades, marches or gatherings, including events such as trade union rallies, under the banner of the BBC group to which they belong, but not representing the organisation as a whole.

People working in news and current affairs and factual journalism (across all Divisions), as set out in the Guidelines, should not participate in public demonstrations or gatherings about controversial issues. As with social media activity, judgement is required as to what issues are “controversial” with regard to marches or demonstrations, though it should be assumed that most marches are contentious to some degree or other. If in doubt, advice should be sought before attending.

Charity walks, marathons and similar activities can be undertaken by BBC news and current affairs and factual journalism staff (in all Divisions) as fundraising activity for charitable purposes but not for campaigning or political action. BBC staff should not become the face of a charity. Small local charities should not cause issues but advice may be sought.

Context

Formats should not be confused with genre: the style of a particular programme does not affect its responsibilities. All programmes in the News and Current Affairs genre are subject to the same impartiality requirements regardless of their format. Our obligation to objectivity and impartiality applies, regardless of format or platform. The informality and conversational nature of some formats may lead to a greater risk of the presenters’ personal opinions intruding on air, but that does not mean the expression of opinion is any more appropriate.

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