

FROM SEESAW TO WAGON WHEEL

Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century



'Wagon Wheel' cricket graphic superimposed on The Gabba (Brisbane Cricket Ground)

FOREWORD

Impartiality has always been (together with independence) the BBC's defining quality. It is not by chance that all BBC staff carry an identity card which proclaims as the first of the BBC's values that they are independent, impartial and honest.

Nor was it by chance that, when the BBC's public purposes were defined in the Corporation's new Royal Charter, the first of them was 'sustaining citizenship and civil society'.

The reach of the BBC's services, the trust which the public places in them and the tradition of impartiality in the culture of the organisation are the keys to ensuring that the BBC delivers in this, the most important of its responsibilities.

The BBC Trust is ultimately responsible to licence fee payers for ensuring that the BBC remains impartial. It will continue to monitor BBC impartiality and to be the final court of appeal in complaints about impartiality and accuracy.

But this Report is different from previous subject-based reports on impartiality commissioned by the BBC Governors. Stemming from the 2005 Goodman Media Lecture by the then BBC Chairman, Michael Grade, its purpose is to consider the BBC's impartiality at a time of great changes in the broadcasting environment and in British society more generally. It has been charged with two tasks: to 'define a set of principles of impartiality in a forward-looking way', and to 'identify a list of broad implications for the BBC'. Its remit embraces the BBC's domestic services, not the World Service, although impartiality (together with all the BBC's editorial values and standards) is required uniformly, irrespective of platform.

The Report, commissioned by the Governors in conjunction with Management, is not a review of past practice, although it cannot avoid taking some recent programmes and trends as case studies in the attempt to understand the present and illuminate the future.

It is a BBC document, which has now been approved and adopted by both the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive Board. It has been written by John Bridcut, an independent programme-maker (who began his career in the BBC) with direct experience of practical dilemmas posed by the challenge of impartiality. He has been able to draw on the advice, wisdom and experience of a Steering Group, comprising three of the BBC's most senior executives, two Governors, two Trustees, a former broadcasting regulator and four external consumers of the BBC's output.¹

The Report is further based on three specific inputs into this project:

- specially-commissioned audience research;
- interviews with commissioners, broadcasters and programme-makers within and without the BBC, as well as a number of commentators and other interested parties;

¹ The membership of the Steering Group is given at Appendix A

- a one-day seminar for invited guests in September 2006, which was streamed live on the Governors' website.

It suggests some guiding principles for the application of impartiality at the BBC and draws a number of conclusions for the Trust and the Executive Board to enhance its delivery.

In the process, it aims to develop the traditional understanding of what impartiality means to take account of the changing environment, and demonstrates how this can apply across the full range of the BBC's activities. The Report is not intended to prescribe definitive solutions or an impartiality template, but it provides a number of proposals for practical action, and aims to stimulate further discussion throughout the BBC and so bring impartiality to the forefront of the production process.

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Chairman, Impartiality Steering Group

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1. SUMMARY

Impartiality in broadcasting has long been assumed to apply mainly to party politics and industrial disputes. It involved keeping a balance to ensure the seesaw did not tip too far to one side or the other.

Those days are over. In today's multi-polar Britain, with its range of cultures, beliefs and identities, impartiality involves many more than two sides to an argument. Party politics is in decline, and industrial disputes are only rarely central to national debate. The seesaw has been replaced by the wagon wheel – the modern version used in the television coverage of cricket, where the wheel is not circular and has a shifting centre with spokes that go in all directions.

From its foundation, the BBC developed an impartial approach which distinguished it from the largely partisan world of print. Other broadcasters followed this lead, and impartiality became a central feature of public service broadcasting. Now, in the early 21st century, with digital switchover only a few years away, impartiality is under increasing pressure – whether from shock-jocks, opinionated news channels, or unregulated broadband broadcasters.

The BBC is not isolated from these developments. Thanks to the revolution in communications technology, its programmes swim in the same sea. The convergence of platforms, services and technical devices is blurring the boundaries between television, radio and print, and creating a single media market. People no longer need to go to fixed points to watch or listen: they can now access BBC material almost anywhere, by wireless connections and handheld devices – and often via portals which have no interest in or understanding of impartiality. The public can tailor content to suit themselves, and are increasingly able to view or listen on demand.

Whereas the audience used simply to consume broadcasting, it is now a full participant. People upload as well as download content, they set up their own blogs or videoblogs, they communicate with programme-makers before, during and after transmission, and they increasingly offer their own pictures to television newsrooms. This much greater audience involvement has become a major factor in determining impartiality.

The BBC has a proud record in this area. With the volume of BBC output, some of it delivered at high speed, there will always be specific problems that arise. There are also those who suspect the BBC of having a point of view. But the evidence of the audience research in this Report is that the BBC is generally seen as impartial, and that this impartiality is both demanded and valued. It is the basis of the public's trust, without which the BBC cannot function.

Impartiality involves a mixture of accuracy, balance, context, distance, evenhandedness, fairness, objectivity, open-mindedness, rigour, self-awareness, transparency and truth.

But it is also about breadth of view and completeness. Impartiality in programme-making is often achieved by bringing extra perspectives to bear, rather than limiting horizons or censoring opinion. It applies to every programme-maker and content-provider in the BBC.

Conclusions

The BBC has the mechanisms to improve its delivery of impartiality, in the form of Editorial Policy (its editorial advisory department) and its new College of Journalism. Both need an extended role, so that impartiality is addressed much earlier in the production process than is often the case, and programme-makers dealing with factual output (whether they come from factual or non-factual areas) are trained to deal with the many new impartiality problems that arise in this fast-changing media environment.

The Report also recommends that close attention is paid to themed seasons (particularly when they are multi-genre and multi-platform): these need clearer editorial supervision. The growing trend towards celebrity-driven, single-issue campaigns presents the BBC with impartiality dilemmas, particularly in entertainment areas dealing with factual material. And the rapid growth in user-generated content presents logistical and ethical challenges for newsrooms. The detailed conclusions are listed on pages 77-81.

Twelve Guiding Principles

The BBC already has a set of carefully worked out Editorial Guidelines (June 2005) which offer help and advice over the application of impartiality. In addressing the dramatic changes currently underway in the media environment, and those in British society as a whole, this Report suggests twelve guiding principles to amplify that advice.

These principles therefore complement, rather than replace, the impartiality sections in the Editorial Guidelines.

1. Impartiality is and should remain the hallmark of the BBC as the leading provider of information and entertainment in the United Kingdom, and as a pre-eminent broadcaster internationally. It is a legal requirement, but it should also be a source of pride.

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Impartiality on the BBC began as an ambitious, home-grown aspiration which developed culturally rather than legalistically. Far from being imposed on the BBC, impartiality has been conceived by the BBC. It is part of its brand, but needs to be reassessed in a more diverse society where many of the old certainties and shared assumptions have melted away.

2. Impartiality is an essential part of the BBC's contract with its audience, which owns and funds the BBC. Because of that, the audience itself will often be a factor in determining impartiality.

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The audience understands perfectly well what impartiality is, and feels strongly that the BBC should be impartial. With the audience contributing more frequently to output, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the weight of this involvement should affect impartiality judgements. The rapid growth of user-generated content is welcome as an extra resource in news reporting, subject to checks on its authenticity.

3. Impartiality must continue to be applied to matters of party political or industrial controversy. But in today's more diverse political, social and cultural landscape, it requires a wider and deeper application. *page 33*

Today's political and cultural landscape has changed dramatically. Voter turnout has been in decline, party politics seem much less sharply defined, and the UK Parliament competes with other centres of democratic expression. The internet, blogs and online petitions demonstrate that contemporary political activity may have moved away from the party political arena. Impartiality today needs to embrace a broader range of opinion.

4. Impartiality involves breadth of view, and can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on the centre ground. *page 37*

The continuing changes in British society mean that the parameters of 'normality' and 'extremism' have shifted. Reporting from the centre ground is often the wrong place to be. Impartiality does not entail equal space for every attitude, but it should involve some space provided that points of view are rationally and honestly held, and all of them are subject to equal scrutiny. It is not the BBC's role to close down debate.

5. Impartiality is no excuse for insipid programming. It allows room for fair-minded, evidence-based judgments by senior journalists and documentary-makers, and for controversial, passionate and polemical arguments by contributors and writers. *page 42*

Programmes would be bland and sometimes pointless, if they were never able to reach conclusions based on evidence. That is a proper role for the BBC's senior journalists and documentary-makers. There should also be greater scope for contentious authored programmes, provided the authorship is clear, and that over time there is a balance of opinion across the intellectual spectrum.

6. Impartiality applies across all BBC platforms and all types of programme. No genre is exempt. But the way it is applied and assessed will vary in different genres. *page 47*

Impartiality is a process which affects every area of programming. But it will apply in different ways in different genres, as the audience clearly understands, and it often presents opportunities as well as challenges. In entertainment, it may involve filling in parts of the creative canvas, which for whatever reason have previously been left blank.

7. Impartiality is most obviously at risk in areas of sharp public controversy. But there is a less visible risk, demanding particular vigilance, when programmes purport to reflect a consensus for 'the common good', or become involved with campaigns. *page 54*

Campaigns always need particular care, particularly when they seem uncontroversial. The BBC has to take care it does not give political campaigns a free ride. But at the same time the BBC needs to be fully involved in major events that capture the national imagination.

8. Impartiality is often not easy. There is no template of wisdom which will eliminate fierce internal debate over difficult dilemmas. But the BBC's journalistic expertise is an invaluable resource for all departments to draw on. *page 61*

Because impartiality is hard to pin down precisely, its application will sometimes be hotly debated and disputed within the BBC. A *Hypothetical* exercise at the BBC seminar on

impartiality rehearsed a number of dilemmas. It was clear that there was no default position on impartiality at a senior editorial level.

9. Impartiality can often be affected by the stance and experience of programme-makers, who need constantly to examine and challenge their own assumptions. *page 64*

Programme-makers need to check regularly how their own stance and beliefs relate to those of the audience. At the impartiality seminar there was debate about whether there was a set of shared assumptions among BBC programme makers. There can never be too much fresh, lateral or distinctive thinking, and it is up to programme editors and series producers to stimulate it.

10. Impartiality requires the BBC to examine its own institutional values, and to assess the effect they have on its audiences. *page 71*

As a broadcaster and programme maker the BBC is not impersonal: it cannot avoid having both character and attitude. It now has a defined set of public purposes. The BBC's corporate behaviour and programming policy convey messages to its audiences, sometimes quite unconsciously, and these may affect the judgment of impartiality.

11. Impartiality is a process, about which the BBC should be honest and transparent with its audience: this should permit greater boldness in its programming decisions. But impartiality can never be fully achieved to everyone's satisfaction: the BBC should not be defensive about this but ready to acknowledge and correct significant breaches as and when they occur. *page 74*

Transparency is an important part of impartiality, and the BBC has to take the audience into its confidence over its decision-making. In that way, the public will understand the process better and the relationship of trust will be secure.

12. Impartiality is required of everyone involved in output. It applies as much to the most junior researcher as it does to the Director-General. But editors and executive producers must give a strong lead to their teams. They must ensure that the impartiality process begins at the conception of a programme and lasts throughout production: if left until the approval stage, it is usually too late. *page 76*

Most impartiality issues arise early in production, sometimes when the programme idea is first mooted. When impartiality presents dilemmas, recognition of them is the essential first step and this may require training and awareness-raising in different genres and platforms.

2. THE CONTEXT

A matter of trust

‘The first job of journalism is to find out, communicate accurately, and be trusted’¹. If this is true, journalism has a problem. In a recent survey, people in Britain were asked whom they trusted to tell them the truth – and journalists scored a paltry 19%, just squeezed into bottom place by politicians (20%) and government ministers (22%). But this is not the full story.

Top of the poll were doctors (with a trust rating of 92%), teachers (88%), judges and the clergy (75% each).² Not far behind in this pantheon of virtue came television newsreaders, at 66%. It is interesting, and encouraging, that the public makes such a clear distinction between journalists in the press and those on television – particularly since television is still seen as the most important source of news in Britain. It was given pride of place (in a separate survey) by 55%, compared with 19% for newspapers, 12% for radio, and 8% for the internet.³

We live today in a more sceptical, less deferential age than any of us has known. The deteriorating relationship between press and politicians, (‘destructive, sterile and self-referential’ in the words of Alan Rusbridger, Editor of *The Guardian*), has contributed to a breakdown of trust between those who govern and those who are governed. Rusbridger went on to say that the press/politician relationship ‘dangerously excludes readers as well as viewers and voters. It is a vicious circle in which both sides blame each other, both convinced that they are the moral guardians.’ It had ‘serious consequences for the democratic process.’⁴

John Lloyd’s critique in *What the Media are Doing to our Politics*⁵ takes both press and broadcasters to task for heedless damage to the political system. And a parliamentary committee urged some years ago that ‘governments should play it straight and the media should play it fair’.⁶

In 2004, the Phillis Report highlighted ‘a three-way breakdown in trust between government and politicians, the media and the general public’.⁷ It underlined a growing disillusionment, especially among the young and certain ethnic groups, which resulted in a disengagement from political and democratic processes, as shown by declining voter turnout. The BBC’s submission to this committee argued that ‘media, government and voters need a common currency in which they can trade. That currency is factual information.’

¹ Ian Hargreaves *Journalism: Truth or Dare?* (OUP 2003) p265

² Ipsos-MORI survey: Opinion of Professions 2006

³ Globescan survey commissioned for the BBC, Reuters and The Media Center, March-April 2006

⁴ Speech at Stirling University, November 2001

⁵ (Constable & Robinson 2004)

⁶ 8th Report of the Public Administration Select Committee, July 2002

⁷ *An Independent Review of Government Communications* (Chairman: Bob Phillis) January 2004

Such a common currency is needed in all areas of our national life – not just in politics. Further research for the Phillis Report showed that the public regards direct information – letters, leaflets and paid-for advertising – as more trustworthy than anything received through a media filter, particularly print media. Only 6% of respondents listed any newspaper as the fairest and most unbiased source of news, compared with 70% for television.

Trust in the media is a more critical issue now than ever, because that trust is no longer blind. Thanks to the rapid expansion of news sources and other information on the internet, on blogs and other unofficial information networks, the public has immediate access to much of the raw information that journalists and programme-makers select. Public trust today is informed, watchful, calculating. The recent revelations by various broadcasters about the handling of audience interactivity and premium-rate telephone calls on some entertainment programmes are a pointer to how vulnerable that trust can be.

Twenty-five years ago, the audience consisted of millions of unconnected individuals, whose links were mostly with friends, family and acquaintances at work, within their own geographical environment or within Britain by landline telephone. Now many of them are linked up instantly across continents, communicating by broadband email, instant messages or SMS, let alone webcam and videophone.

This empowering and democratising communications revolution is changing the balance of power between producer and consumer. Retail and service suppliers used to have the comfort of knowing that their customers had no mechanism for connecting with the public at large, and never even thought of sharing their experiences beyond their circle of friends. Now these suppliers are at the instant mercy of public judgment which snowballs among complete strangers on the internet. In the same way, consumers of broadcasting know what's going on, and have a much more informed judgment to make about the actions and values of producers. Today's consumers are frequently producers themselves, as the amount of available user-generated content expands. In America, 57% of teenagers are reckoned to create content for the internet (whether text, pictures or music)¹: it has been a small step from desktop publishing to desktop producing.

This electronic linkage between disparate parts of the audience is changing both politics and journalism. Peter Horrocks, the BBC's Head of Television News, recently called (in the context of securing a reputation for excellence for the BBC's domestic journalism) for 'an unembarrassed embrace of subject areas that have too often been looked down on as too pavement-level or parish-pump'.² Among the examples he quoted were the collapse of the savings group Farepak, and the 'less frequent rubbish collections that leave unsanitary garbage in the streets'. Stories such as these have long been at the heart of the BBC's regional and local news services, but national news has perhaps been slow to grasp them as having national significance. They are examples of pavement-level politics relevant to audiences nationally, because those audiences are now much more joined-up. Both broadcasters and parliamentarians have some catching up to do.

¹ Pew Internet and American Life Project

² *Finding TV News' Lost Audience* (Lecture at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism) November 2006

Quite apart from the revolution in the delivery of broadcasting output, there is a major cultural change afoot. It means that trust when it comes from an empowered, informed audience is an even more valuable commodity. And opinion research shows that impartiality plays a central part in delivering that trust. If the trust is to be earned, impartiality can no longer be served out from on high, along with dollops of nectar and ambrosia: it has to be shared with and understood by our increasingly active audience.

Existing arrangements

The BBC's compliance with impartiality is the responsibility of the BBC Trust. The Framework Agreement accompanying the 2006 Royal Charter states that the BBC 'must do all it can to ensure that controversial subjects are treated with due accuracy and impartiality in all relevant output', which is defined as output consisting of news or dealing with matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy. The Trust is charged with drawing up a code to achieve this, and with securing compliance with the code.¹ 'Accurate and impartial news' is also listed among the Trust's requirements for developing the BBC's first public purpose: sustaining citizenship and civil society.

The Executive Board (previously the Executive Committee) is answerable to the Trust for the delivery of impartiality – as it is for all programme standards. The impartiality requirement is spelt out in the current (June 2005) edition of the Editorial Guidelines in general terms, and also in respect of its coverage of politics and public policy, religion, charities and campaigns.² These guidelines (the Trust's code) are amplified on the BBC website³.

Formally, the principal authority in this area is Controller Editorial Policy, with the assistance of Chief Adviser, Politics. Editorial Policy is an advisory unit which reports to the Deputy Director-General, and to the Trust as required, and is available for consultation and occasional trouble-shooting by programme-makers and output-producers across the Corporation. But it is also pro-active, in holding monthly meetings on current issues of editorial policy, and has recently held policy roadshows in Cardiff and Belfast for BBC staff, freelancers and independent producers.

Since 2004 the BBC has had the additional benefit of the Journalism Board, which meets fortnightly to discuss sensitive or complex editorial issues within the whole journalistic output of the BBC. Its members include the Deputy Director-General (who is head of the BBC's journalism), the Director of News, the Director of Global News, the Director of Nations and Regions, the Director of Sport, and Controller Editorial Policy. The new College of Journalism has recently launched an online training module on impartiality, presented by Evan Davies. An earlier module, on the pitfalls of loaded language in the Middle East, was presented by Jeremy Bowen.

¹ Section 44 of the Framework Agreement is reproduced in full at Appendix E

² The relevant paragraphs (from sections 1 and 4) of the 2005 Editorial Guidelines are reproduced at Appendix F

³ www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines

Before its replacement by the Trust, the Board of Governors was monitoring impartiality in the BBC's output in three different ways:

- (a) by adjudicating complaints submitted to the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee¹, which could hear appeals against the verdict of the Management's complaints procedure (Editorial Complaints Unit);
- (b) by commissioning a series of impartiality reviews (which were not adjudications on specific complaints), related to particular subject areas – the three most recent being business, Israel and the Palestinians, and Europe; and
- (c) by requiring a quarterly review of perceptions of impartiality from BBC management.

The Governors then reported on editorial compliance in the Annual Report.

The Trust has set up an Editorial Standards Committee, which will handle complaints, and it has inherited one of the impartiality reviews (on business programming). It is likely also to inherit oversight of the outcomes of this project, which began last year, when the Governors decided to look further ahead and address the difficulties for the BBC's impartiality posed by the dramatic changes in the broadcasting environment, and in society more generally.

The Trust's regulation of impartiality across BBC services contrasts with arrangements for the rest of the broadcasting industry, where impartiality is regulated (with potential sanctions) by Ofcom. Although Ofcom is not directly involved in impartiality issues at the BBC, it has set up a 'Future of News' project, which is examining the provision and consumption of news in the light of digital switchover on television, and the consequent scope and desirability of regulatory intervention. Specifically it will consider how impartiality should be handled in a convergent media environment. Ofcom's project is due to report later in 2007.

New media

Broadcasting is changing shape at a rapid and accelerating pace, and the BBC's Creative Futures initiative has contemplated the likely consequences of the digital communications revolution as it will affect both providers and consumers of content. This is taking shape through five different trends: convergence, mobility, personalisation, on-demand and participation.

The **convergence** of platforms, services and technical devices is blurring the boundaries between television, radio and print, and creating a single market for video/audio/text. This creates opportunities to boost the impact of programming with ancillary multi-media content. The press was at first satisfied to upload its printed newspapers on to the web: now it has rolling newspapers online – which was inconceivable when CNN blazed the 24-hour news trail back in 1980.

¹ Two recent impartiality complaints referred to the GPCC related to Barbara Plett's reporting of the departure of Yasser Arafat from Gaza shortly before his death, and Guto Harri's reporting of the boeing of Michael Howard in the 2005 General Election. Both complaints (that the impartiality guidelines had been breached) were upheld.

Mobility means that people no longer have to go to fixed points to consume media. They can access services almost anywhere by wireless connections and handheld devices. At present the two providers are mobile phone networks and local area wi-fi networks – both of which are able to control the flow of content to their users.

By **personalisation**, media users can tailor content to suit themselves. This could result in a sharply reduced role for the broadcaster or newspaper in selecting and editing content, and will make it much easier for consumers to avoid whole areas of output which hold no interest for them.

On-demand programming is increasingly available through programmable digital video recorders (PVRs), podcasting, the short-term Watch/Listen Again facility, file-sharing and audio/video streaming. The BBC's forthcoming iPlayer will allow people to download programmes within a seven-day window after broadcast, and to retain them on hard drives for up to thirty days. PVRs are already owned by more than two million households, and their standard capacity, according to Richard Deverell (leader of the 'Beyond Broadcast' part of Creative Futures), could well reach 1,000 hours before long. On-demand programming means that the direct link between broadcaster and audience is weakened and schedules become less important, with the emergence of what might once have been called 'middle-men' – content sources (even if not originators) such as MSN, Yahoo! and Google.

Participation flows from the consumer's ability to upload content as well as download it, thanks to broadband. Blogging began as a social activity on the internet, but has become both a professional marketing tool and a forum for serious public debate. There are now reported to be more than 66 million blogs worldwide – and counting: the figure grows by 175,000 a day.¹ Consequently, blogs have begun to influence opinion and newsgathering – although as yet they inspire little public trust (5% in the UK, compared with 18% in the USA)². But a recent online survey suggests that a majority of Americans (55%) regard bloggers as important to the future of US journalism.³ Bloggers have so far played a more influential role in the USA than in the UK. They have arguably claimed two scalps there – those of Senator Trent Lott, whose comments about racial segregation were first disseminated in blogs, and the news anchorman Dan Rather, who quit after bloggers revealed that a CBS story questioning President Bush's military record was based on forged documents. But Britain has now had its first major news story broken by bloggers – the contacts disclosed in summer 2006 between John Prescott and the American billionaire Philip Anschutz. Video-blogging here has been growing fast: the number of YouTube users, for example, rose almost sixfold in the first six months of 2006. Even if some of the unmoderated content has caused problems, other social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and FriendsReunited could become more influential as subscribers create and share their own content.

¹ Information from technorati.com, a blog-tracking firm, February 2007

² Telegraph Media Group, May 2006 (survey of 6,066 adults in the UK, 1,798 in the USA, 1,605 in France and Denmark)

³ We-Media – Zogby Interactive Survey (of 5,384 adults in the USA), Jan/Feb 2007

‘Citizen-journalism’ and user-generated content (UGC) are further examples of the blend of amateur and professional input (and 76% of those responding to the recent Zogby survey in the USA believe that citizen journalists will play ‘a vital role’ in American journalism). Consumers can also set up their own television channels on the web, such as 18 Doughty St Talk TV, recently established by Conservative Party supporters. Because web channels are beyond the regulatory reach of Ofcom, they are completely free of any legal requirement to be impartial – and this freedom may become infectious.

For the BBC, all this is a far cry from the single-platform days of 2LO on the wireless, or a sole 405-lines channel on television. The Corporation is embracing with both courage and vision the challenges that digital communications technology presents – and the high global profile of bbc.co.uk among pre-eminent information websites testifies to the BBC’s foresight and ambition in this area. But, whereas most other players in the new media world operate with, at most, a light touch of self-regulation, the BBC has chosen a different course: all its new media and print output is produced under the same Guidelines as its broadcast programmes. Impartiality therefore plays a central role (and all polling evidence suggests it is prized by audiences), whereas for most new media operators, impartiality is not even on the cast list.

The growing trend will be for BBC programmes to be accessed less and less by the push of a button on either the receiver or the remote control, and more via the internet and new media operators. This may mean that the BBC’s impartiality becomes a haven – a clearing reachable only through dense, unregulated forest. And clearings can be quickly overtaken by undergrowth if the ground is not staked out.

At present, the communications revolution has not substantially changed the overall amount of television viewing and radio listening, although closer examination of the figures suggests that children and young adults are consuming less output than they were. They have begun the infectious process of creating their own programmes and communicating with each other without mediation from a broadcaster – a massive, and powerful, unofficial information and news network. It is probably misleading for broadcasters to refer any more to ‘the audience’, which is now thoroughly plural and diverse, and does much more than simply listen or watch.

But if the pace of change is sometimes bewildering, it should not be bewitching. First, the digital divide means that there is still a substantial section of the population which has not changed its consumption behaviour: a Creative Futures audiences paper indicated that almost 40% of adults have not yet used the internet. Second, it does not mean that existing transmission patterns are already redundant. Some consumers will weary of almost infinite choice, and be content to delegate commissioning and scheduling to others. Not everyone who sits down in a restaurant is happy to hear that the chef will prepare any dish in the world that his customers want – or indeed will help them to make it themselves. Menus of recommended or unexpected dishes still have their attraction. Fixed points in the radio and

TV schedules, and the plop of the newspaper on the doormat, are likely to remain for some years to come.¹

Broadcasters, audiences and UGC

For its 2006 Person of the Year, *Time* magazine chose ‘you, the public – for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game’.²

Twenty years ago, the most that the public could aspire to was to take part in radio phone-ins, or to sign up as part of a studio audience. After transmission, people could ring the BBC Duty Office, or write to *Points of View*, Jimmy Young, or *PM*. Today, they don’t start there. They can be actively involved in the preparation of programmes, by texting or emailing the producers. This interactivity, whether built into the programme concept or not, has been one of the biggest changes in broadcast output in the last ten years. Editorial priorities on *Newsbeat* are now directly affected by the audience’s comments each morning, according to its Editor, Rod McKenzie, and other programmes have a similar experience. The days of deference towards, or paternalism from, the BBC are over – or should be.

This applies also to areas where audiences operate under their own steam, irrespective of programmes – and here the BBC’s efforts to achieve impartiality may pass them by. There are already several BBC platforms where traditional impartiality is unsustainable. Message boards, for example, are either moderated after messages have been posted (in the case of sites dealing with controversial or polarised debate) or ‘reactively’ on request (on less controversial sites, which rely largely on user-regulation): only on sensitive sites, such as those used by children or those involved in problems of personal health, are messages moderated in advance. On each site, there is normally a host, who meets and greets contributors, stimulates discussion, monitors the tone, and defuses rows. But hosts rarely intervene except to protect users against abuse, defamation, indecency or poor taste – they do not import fairness, accuracy or impartiality. The whole point of message boards is that opinion should, in general, flow freely, as it does on *Have Your Say* on bbc.co.uk, with only such balance as the contributors themselves happen to supply.

It is not simply a matter of contributing opinion. The audience can offer facts. Even in the short period since the publication of the Editorial Guidelines (June 2005), the meaning of UGC has changed. It then was applied to message boards and public contributions to other online sites. Now, two years later, it is more often understood to mean amateur stills and video sent to newsrooms from mobile phones. This reflects the way such UGC has mushroomed in that period – along with video news releases (VNRs) from those with causes to promote. Before that, amateur stills and video were available to news networks – but for a long time were not given either the credence or the value of their professional equivalents. Now that has changed. Sometimes they themselves become the story, as with the pictures of prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq.

¹ Forecasts for the level of ‘non-linear’ (or ‘on-demand’) listening and viewing vary widely, in television’s case from 30% by the year 2015 (in the O&O survey for PACT), to 70% (in Creative Futures). But this is in part surmise. As usual, the proof of the pudding will be in the consuming

² 13 December 2006

Amateur digital pictures are different only in the speed with which they can now be transmitted around the world, between individuals or via broadcasters. BBC News first used such pictures in quantity after the London bombings of July 2005 (300 were sent in), and then again after the Buncefield oil depot fire (when, only five months later, 15,000 images were received). Now the mobile phone operator 3 is planning a direct channel to broadcasters, by which its subscribers may feed images of a news event straight into newsrooms, so that citizen journalists become, in effect, news agency reporters. There are also pictures circulating on web portals such as YouTube whose provenance and authenticity may be unverifiable.

At some point in the future, a broadcast news organisation may be caught out by digital images being manufactured or distorted to suit a particular case or cause. Piers Morgan, after all, lost his job as editor of the *Daily Mirror* in such circumstances, and CNN famously broadcast an eyewitness account shortly after Princess Diana's fatal car crash, only to discover later that the so-called bystander was a practised hoaxer. The speed at which UGC and VNRs can now be disseminated imposes harsh pressures on newsroom decision-making about their credibility and reliability¹. There are also ethical issues about intrusiveness and personal privacy to consider². But any decision not to transmit can result in the broadcaster feeling out-classed and overtaken, as the wildfire spreads informally on mobile phones and the internet. That wildfire generates its own excitement. The dilemma when the pictures are offered live is not new: after all, the BBC's decision during the Falklands War to carry in the evening news live (and unseen) statements of the latest military position from the Ministry of Defence spokesman, Ian McDonald, amounted in some eyes to an equivalent – and potentially more significant – surrender of editorial control. But today, the decisions have to be taken much faster, on the basis of conversations with anonymous suppliers on mobile phones which cannot even be geographically identified.

Editorial perspectives

The BBC has a long and honourable tradition of international broadcasting in English and many other languages. Its editorial values, accuracy and impartiality command respect around the world. Today, thanks to satellite communications and the worldwide web, much of the BBC's domestic output is available internationally. The BBC can have only one set of editorial values: there cannot be one for domestic output and another for international. So when the BBC took the decision in February 2006 to show, to a limited extent, the Danish cartoons which had caused great offence to some Muslims, there could be no separation between News 24 and BBC World. Similarly, the protests which followed in some parts of the Islamic world made no geographical distinction.

The editorial perspectives of the BBC set a public service framework within which much of British news broadcasting continues to operate. This is in sharp contrast with the printed media, which have a longer tradition of opinionated journalism. Although many newspapers maintain a strong commitment to accuracy and fairness, none of them particularly espouses impartiality as a virtue. Fairness within a partisan context is not the same as impartiality.

¹ See Editorial Guidelines, section 3, page 22: 'Use of Third Party Material in News and Factual Output'

² Editorial guidance on UGC can be found online at:
www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/videoaudioandstills

Newspapers believe that their strongest contribution to the democratic process lies in their own distinct (and often partisan) editorial identity, around which readers of like mind can gather. Broadcasting in Britain has always been different: because of its universality, the absence of an editorial line has been thought to serve democracy better.

Until now. With the proliferation of broadcast outlets around the world in the new age of spectrum plenty which digital broadcasting permits, it is possible – indeed reasonable – to imagine a free and varied market of opinionated channels, stacked up on the server like magazines and newspapers on a rack, from which ever more agile and canny consumers can take their pick.

This began to happen from the early stages of de-regulation in Britain. *Channel 4 News* was launched twenty-five years ago with the express purpose of offering an alternative approach to services on the BBC and the rest of ITN. The newest news outlet, Al-Jazeera's English-language channel, offers another alternative vision, with different news judgments and editorial priorities. Avowedly opinionated news as pioneered by Fox News in the United States (now available in the UK) has growing appeal. Shock-jocks on radio have no inhibitions about voicing their personal opinions. *The Independent* has replaced news with attitude on its front page, and on occasion other 'quality' newspapers follow suit. Now the first broadband channels are gaining a foothold: 18 Doughty St Talk TV is but one harbinger of partisan television in a parallel TV world – unlicensed and unregulated, just like the pirate radio stations of old. But this time it is legal. As digital switchover in 2012 approaches, the unregulated undergrowth in the forest is advancing on the impartiality clearing.

This territory is where the BBC, with its obligations to the whole licence-paying population, stakes its claim to be impartial. The broadband world is saturated with personal opinion, and it requires confidence and courage to stand apart from this trend. The audience values fair and open minds in broadcasting. It values bright colours, energy and excitement too. That is the impartiality challenge for the BBC – to meet those sometimes conflicting needs, and to continue to build its relationship of trust with the audience.

3. NEW AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Both qualitative and quantitative audience research was commissioned for this Report and carried out across the UK during the summer and autumn of 2006. It amounted to the most substantial piece of audience research about impartiality ever conducted.

Qualitative research

This was undertaken by the Sparkler agency in July and August. It took the form of a series of group discussions that progressively explored the audiences' understanding of the broad concept of impartiality; its importance in relation to their media worlds; the extent to which they believed it mattered more to the BBC than to other outlets; and the variation in its importance across BBC platforms and genres.

Both the concept and the complexity of impartiality in broadcasting turned out to be readily understood, and it was appreciated that it applied differently in different types of programme. It was believed to involve neutrality, open-mindedness and distance, and to work for the common good. This was fundamental to the development and maintenance of a civilised democracy, and reflected society. Neutrality was interpreted as the absence of a point of view; open-mindedness was believed to be essential in underpinning impartiality; and distance, both metaphorical and physical, was also seen as crucial – although a minority felt that reality could be truly reflected only by being at the heart of things.

Respondents recognised that the impartiality challenge was now more difficult, because of a greater spread of views (formed on racial and religious grounds) than had been the case in left-versus-right arguments. Impartiality was seen in terms of the representation and participation of all communities, whether racial, religious or geographical.

Respondents drew a distinction between 'active impartiality', in which an individual or organisation is seen to strive to remain neutral in the quest for truth, accuracy and clarity, and 'passive impartiality', in which such an ethic informs everything that is broadcast in terms of an editorial balance of coverage and opinion.

Whilst they felt that impartiality was important across all broadcasting output, it was crucial and most valuable in news reporting. Respondents looked for 'accurate and reliable information with which people can make up their own minds'. Impartiality was also seen as important in other information-related genres (consumer affairs, factual programming), but less so in entertainment, where it could be restrictive. But any partiality was expected to be 'ironed out over the entire output'. Respondents also felt that 'new points of view had to be heard', to encourage people to see the world differently through entertainment.

Discussions about different platforms highlighted a number of contradictory feelings towards television and radio. On the one hand, TV was seen as impartial, on the basis that the audience could see things for itself, but there was concern over the risk of 'manipulative, emotive editing'. Radio was thought to be more factual than TV, but susceptible to bias because the audience couldn't 'see what is going on'. The internet was considered to be the

most impartial platform overall because of its enormous breadth and its apparently impersonal nature. Print, by contrast, was regarded as, ‘on the whole, partisan’.

The BBC was seen generally as impartial. Some respondents felt it had gone ‘too far’ in its representation of racial minorities on ‘mainstream’ output. There was a feeling that the search for impartiality had at times led to political correctness, which (although indicative of a civilised, respectful society) was itself a symbol of bias. It was widely felt that there was geographical bias, with most respondents outside south-east England believing they were under-represented.

According to the survey, the BBC should strive for impartiality, both in terms of what it is and what it does. This was especially important in news, current and consumer affairs, documentaries and children’s programming.

(The full report by Sparkler can be found at Appendix B.)

Quantitative research

Ipsos-MORI then conducted an omnibus survey of 2000 people in October with the aim of testing and quantifying the Sparkler findings. With a definition of impartiality as giving the public ‘a fair and informed view on events and issues, in order to let the audience make up their own mind’, Ipsos-MORI explored in particular:

- (a) the importance of impartiality;
- (b) how journalists and reporters attempt to achieve impartiality; and
- (c) what kind of views and opinions a broadcaster should report on.

The research was broken down demographically (by gender, age, social class, region, newspaper readership, voting intention, ethnicity, internet access and multi-channel TV access).

The importance of impartiality

The Ipsos-MORI results demonstrate that almost all the audience regards impartiality as an important goal in broadcasting. But nearly half of the respondents believed there was no such thing as impartiality – and a clear majority thought that broadcasters often failed to give a fair and informed view.

84% of the sample agreed (half of them ‘strongly’) with the proposition that *impartiality is difficult to achieve, but broadcasters must try very hard to do so*. Only 3% disagreed: the rest had no view. A noticeably lower level of support for this was expressed by those aged 24 or under, those of non-white ethnicity, and by those in social classes DE.

At the same time, almost half the sample (44%) agreed that *it is impossible to be impartial – there is no such thing*. 33% disagreed with this.

A clear majority (61%) agreed that ***broadcasters may think they give a fair and informed view, but a lot of the time they don't.*** Only 17% disagreed. The figures remained fairly constant in the different groups.

The approach of journalists and reporters to impartiality

Looking more specifically at the level of support for the notion that 'neutrality', 'open-mindedness' and 'distance' are key components of impartiality (as indicated by the qualitative research), the Ipsos-MORI survey found substantial backing for the importance of these three concepts. But, as in the Sparkler research, support for 'distance' was less strong than for the other two.

Asked how important it is that reporters and journalists ***stay open-minded, for example not making assumptions or judgments about people or events,*** 96% of respondents said it was important, with more than a third (38%) believing it was 'vital'. This latter figure was much higher in the case of ABC1s than of C2DEs. It was also higher among 45-54-year-olds (50%) than among the young or the elderly. The overall importance level was lower (88%) in the case of those from an ethnic minority, where there was a higher level of don't-knows.

On the question of whether they should ***stay neutral – and not give their own view, however difficult that is,*** 33% said it was 'vital', 47% 'very important' and 14% 'fairly important' – making a total of 94% for the view that it was important. Slightly higher importance was attached by those aged 45-54, and slightly lower importance by those aged under 24, but in general there was little variation.

As far as 'distance' is concerned, a lower total (89%) said it was important that reporters and journalists ***maintain a certain distance – not getting too close to the issue they are reporting on.*** But only 18% thought this was 'vital' to achieve impartiality. It was noticeable that 'distance' had lower backing among younger ABC1s (53% thinking it either 'vital' or 'very important') than among ABC1s over 55 (where the figure was 75%). The importance level was also lower among those from ethnic minorities (where the don't-knows were again sharply higher).

When comparing different approaches to impartiality, the combined figures for those regarding them as 'vital' or 'very important' are instructive:

<i>Stay open-minded, not making assumptions about people or events</i>	86%
<i>Stay neutral, not giving own view, however difficult that is</i>	80%
<i>Let us hear different people giving their own stories in their own words</i>	80%
<i>Give us a considered analysis of events taking place</i>	77%
<i>Stand back and ask critical and rigorous questions of others</i>	71%
<i>Maintain a certain distance – not getting too close to the issue reported on</i>	65%

The reporting of views and opinions

The highest level of agreement (83%) was expressed for the idea that ***broadcasters should report on all views and opinions, however unpopular or extreme some of them may***

be, with more than a third of respondents strongly agreeing. 6% disagreed. The only sharp variation in this pattern was among those from ethnic minorities, where 61% agreed, and 10% disagreed.

More than half the sample (57%) agreed that *broadcasters often fail to reflect the views of people like me*, with 15% disagreeing. In all demographic groups, the proposition had more supporters than opponents, but those who supported it most strongly tended to be middle-aged C2DEs, those without access to the internet, and those with least interest in news and current affairs. By contrast, those with the lowest level of agreement were middle-aged ABC1s, readers of ‘quality’ newspapers, and supporters of the Liberal Democrats.

The most contentious of the three propositions tested was that *broadcasters should mainly focus on reporting opinions that are reasonably widespread or that many people believe*. 13% of respondents strongly agreed with this, a further 41% tended to agree, but 25% disagreed. Within these figures were sharp variations. Most support came from people aged 55+, people from social classes C2DE, people from the Midlands and the North, readers of redtop and tabloid newspapers, and people without internet access. Least support came from ABC1s (particularly those aged less than 54), broadband subscribers, and readers of ‘quality’ newspapers (who were evenly split on the issue).

(A summary of the Ipsos-MORI quantitative survey can be found at Appendix C.)

4. OTHER INPUTS INTO THE REPORT

During the preparation of this Report, informal interviews were held with a number of executives, programme-makers and broadcasters from within and without the BBC, as well as with a number of commentators.

In September 2006, the Governors hosted a seminar in central London, entitled *Impartiality: Fact or Fiction*, at which a group of about eighty broadcasters and commentators debated the nature and dilemmas of the impartiality requirement in the 21st century. In the weeks that followed, there were various (often inaccurate) accounts of proceedings at this seminar, which had been streamed live on the BBC Governors' website. The event, chaired by Sue Lawley, included a *Hypothetical* exercise, in which Clive Anderson confronted a number of broadcasters and executives with modern impartiality dilemmas. The Sparkler audience research was presented; there was a discussion about the BBC Two drama *Shoot the Messenger*, and Andrew Marr and Janet Daley presented papers. (The agenda and full transcript of the seminar are attached as Appendix D.)

Themes from all three inputs (research, interviews, seminar) are woven into the Report. Principal contributions from the September seminar are printed in blue. Case studies from output appear in shaded boxes.

5. WHAT IS IMPARTIALITY?

Fortunately this Report is not required to provide an elaborate definition. That is best left to philosophers¹. Nor does it have to start at square one. Impartiality for the BBC is not in question. It is a given – a legal requirement, just as it is for other broadcasters in Britain. It is practised day in, day out, by BBC journalists, who have an impartiality gene implanted in their earliest days at the Corporation. But, as Garret Fitzgerald, the former Taoiseach of the Irish Republic, once famously said: ‘It’s all very well saying how it works in practice. But how does it work in theory?’²

In recent years, the BBC Editorial Guidelines, as well as the Neil Report of 2004³, have attempted an explanation and a description. But it remains an elusive, almost magical substance, which is often more evident in its absence than in its presence.

Imagine twelve bottles on the alchemist’s shelf, with the following labels: Accuracy, Balance, Context, Distance, Evenhandedness, Fairness, Objectivity, Openmindedness, Rigour, Self-Awareness, Transparency and Truth. None of these on its own could legitimately be re-labelled Impartiality. But all the bottles are essential elements in the Impartiality compound, and it is the task of the alchemist, the programme-maker, to mix them in a complex cocktail.

Different proportions may be needed for different genres. But, as the Guidelines make clear, a mixture there must be, in every part of the BBC’s output. The chemical reaction should produce not a solid (too rigid), nor a liquid (too fluid), but an odourless gas (harmless, of course) which will infuse the programme-making environment and be healthily breathed by those who work there. Impartiality is, after all, not a state of grace, but a state of mind.

Unfortunately and misleadingly, the word ‘impartiality’ has a negative ring. Abstract nouns beginning with ‘im-’ – imbalance, impropriety, immorality, imperfection – often do. But impartiality is untypical in being a positive quality. The word ‘partial’ can mean favouring one party against another, or being inclined towards something out of personal predilection. But its original meaning is ‘incomplete’, and in that sense ‘impartiality’ suggests ‘completeness’⁴ or ‘wholeness’ – which can be only positive. And the way to achieve wholeness is to add things in, not to cut them out. So there should be a thirteenth bottle at the alchemist’s disposal, labelled Completeness.

This Report contends that, as a positive quality, impartiality will usually require greater inclusiveness. Just as the most effective method of bringing a tightly-edited radio feature or

¹ The essay on Impartiality published in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (25 March 2002, revised 18 April 2006) deals with moral impartiality, consequentialist impartiality and deontological impartiality

² Quoted by Dominic Morris in his paper: ‘Impartiality in the multi-channel age: a personal view from the trenches’, published in *New News* (edited by D. Tambini and J. Cowling, IPPR 2002)

³ *The BBC’s Journalism after Hutton* Report of a Review Team chaired by Ron Neil, June 2004 Appendix G

⁴ The BBC Governors’ independent panel which reviewed the impartiality of the BBC’s coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict adopted this meaning in paragraph 5.5 on page 29

television documentary down to length can often involve adding something new to force a re-balancing of the rest, so **impartiality in programme-making is often achieved by bringing extra perspectives to bear, rather than limiting horizons or censoring opinion. It applies to every programme-maker and content-provider in the BBC.**

6. TWELVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Editorial Guidelines articulate the BBC's commitment to impartiality, and how this should work in practice. This Report proposes, in addition, twelve guiding principles for the task of safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century. These principles therefore supplement, rather than replace, the impartiality sections in the Editorial Guidelines.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE ONE

Impartiality is and should remain the hallmark of the BBC as the leading provider of information and entertainment in the United Kingdom, and as a pre-eminent broadcaster internationally. It is a legal requirement, but it should also be a source of pride.

The strange thing is that the BBC was never officially told to be impartial. People often assume it was there on its birth certificate – the first Wireless Broadcasting Licence of 1923. It was not. The infant was required merely 'to transmit efficiently' a daily programme 'of broadcast matter to the reasonable satisfaction of the Postmaster-General' (the minister responsible, one Neville Chamberlain), and to rely on an approved list of news agencies to supply its news.

Nor was impartiality mentioned in the first Royal Charter of 1926, by which time the new Corporation was allowed to 'collect news of and information relating to current events in any part of the world and in any manner that may be thought fit'. This formulation for newsgathering (odd as the second part of the phrase sounds to a generation familiar with questionable journalistic tactics in some parts of the press) lasted until just a few months ago, when the 2006 Charter came into force.

At the start, the BBC could broadcast 'controversial programmes' only with the permission of the government, and political broadcasting was largely prohibited. The Postmaster-General told MPs in November 1926 that he had instructed the BBC not to broadcast its own opinions on matters of public policy, nor to broadcast matters of political, industrial or religious controversy. All the same, it had managed, as early as 1923, to hold debates on the contentious issue of tariff reform and on the ideology of Communism, in which a Communist took part.

The BBC was at risk from the fear of new technology, the fear of monopoly power, and the press's fear of competition. To counter these, it developed the idea of opinionless news, at a time when the editorial influence of newspapers and their proprietors was at its peak. Under its first manager, John Reith, impartiality evolved slowly – not least because it was a while before the BBC was allowed a free hand on matters of public controversy. By then it had survived its first big (and potentially fatal) test, the General Strike of May 1926.

Reith himself announced both the beginning and the end of the General Strike. The BBC's coverage was controversial: the views of trade unionists and government critics were given space, but (on government instruction) no

trade unionist or Labour politician was allowed near a microphone during the strike – even though strikers and non-strikers alike gathered in the street to hear the latest news on the wireless. By contrast, when the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, made a broadcast, Reith helped him write it.

Reith was operating on a short leash held by the Conservative government, but he did strike an essential blow for the independence of the fledgling broadcaster by resisting the plans of some ministers to take it over. He went so far as to experiment with the idea of giving the BBC an opinionated voice. Because all newspapers (apart from the government's own propaganda vehicle) had closed down, there were no leader columns, on which national debate was then believed to depend. So Reith briefly instituted editorials on the wireless, which ran between the weather forecast and the news – 'a few words of advice to the ordinary good citizen. You will not expect from us any comment on the merits of the present controversy'. Amid protests from the government and Fleet Street, these continued until three weeks after the General Strike – often appeals for calm, moderation and social justice. At this early stage, the BBC had subscribers: there was no universal licence fee.

Shortly after the strike ended, Reith told his senior staff: 'we were able to give listeners authentic impartial news of the situation to the best of our ability'. But his chief engineer, who had helped process the censored news, later confessed that 'it was not so much that the news was altered as given bias by elimination'.¹ Reith himself made a broadcast on behalf of the BBC on the night the strike ended: 'Our first feeling on hearing of the termination of the General Strike must be one of profound thankfulness to Almighty God, Who has led us through this supreme trial with national health unimpaired. You have heard the messages from the King and from the Prime Minister. It remains only to add the conviction that the nation's happy escape has been in large measure due to a personal trust in the Prime Minister.'² Reith's concept of impartiality was evidently not yet perfectly-formed.³

The first, and very limited, official requirement of impartiality came only in 1952 when, under new Charter documents, the BBC agreed to broadcast 'an impartial account day by day prepared by professional reporters of the proceedings in both Houses of the United Kingdom Parliament'. But the mention of impartiality here was, in all likelihood, to provide reassurance for the opposition parties in Parliament rather than to impose discipline on the BBC.

By then the censorship of the Second World War had come and gone. The BBC's determination of its own content was once again relatively unimpeded. It was the new infant, ITV, that was first given a legislative rulebook in respect of content. When it was set up in 1955, the legislation aimed to ensure that public service broadcasting as devised by the BBC was not destroyed by commercial pressures. Impartiality was imposed by law on the new ITV companies. The Television Act of 1954 required ITV to exercise 'due impartiality'

¹ P.P. Eckersley *The Power Behind the Microphone* (Cape 1941)

² Quoted in Ian McIntyre's biography of Reith *The Expense of Glory* (HarperCollins 1993)

³ A full account of the BBC's output during the General Strike is given in Asa Briggs *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, volume 1* (OUP 1961)

(which was taken to mean a level of impartiality appropriate to the nature and context of the programme) in news and on ‘matters of political or industrial controversy or relating to current public policy’. But not the BBC.

The years passed, and with them Mary Whitehouse, the Northern Ireland troubles, the European referendum, the Falklands War, the miners’ strike, Norman Tebbit’s accusations of BBC bias, the sacking of the BBC director-general after the *Real Lives* controversy, the ban on Sinn Fein, the first Gulf War and the fall of Margaret Thatcher. At the start of the Thatcher government, the BBC had formally undertaken in the Charter documents not to express its own opinion ‘on current affairs or on matters of public policy other than broadcasting’. But it was only in the 1996 Charter that the BBC Governors were finally required, as monitors and supervisors, to ensure that BBC staff, freelancers and independent producers treated ‘controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality’. This was further spelt out as applying to matters of public policy, or political or industrial controversy, but could be measured across a series rather than necessarily in individual programmes.

Until that point, impartiality on the BBC had been largely taken for granted. It was an ambitious, home-grown aspiration, which developed culturally rather than legalistically. We are so used to the concept now that it is easy to let the wonderful originality of the idea pass us by. John Reith was acutely aware of the BBC’s duty and responsibility as the pioneer of new journalistic technology, and used impartiality as a tool of reassurance against those who would otherwise have tried to neuter the BBC. Even at the end of its first year, he was declaring (in reference to public policy issues): ‘Great discretion must be exercised in such matters. But if, on any controversial matter, the opposing views were stated with equal emphasis and lucidity, then at least there can be no charge of bias.’¹

Towards the end of Reith’s reign, the political establishment spent much of 1936 privately consumed by the growing constitutional crisis over the King’s relationship with Wallis Simpson. But the BBC, along with the entire national press, remained silent until December, when news of Edward VIII’s likely abdication burst suddenly on a largely unsuspecting populace. In 1938, the agreement with Hitler signed in Munich by Neville Chamberlain was hailed as a triumph: there was virtually no coverage given in newsreels, the press or radio broadcasts to the dismay felt in some political quarters. Similarly, in 1953, the BBC and the press said not a word about the serious stroke that had incapacitated the prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill. These episodes reflected the tenor of a more deferential age, when information flowed neither fast nor freely – and sometimes not at all. Such a conspiracy with the governing class would not even be physically possible in today’s world of text messaging and personal blogs. It would also be ethically inconceivable – and regarded as undue partiality. Indeed, some members of the public took this view over what they saw as the media’s suppression of reports of Charles Kennedy’s alcoholism.

By the time of Suez in 1956, the government had perhaps not realised how much news was speeding up, and British troops embarking on the invasion famously learned by radio that their military operation was the subject of bitter dispute at home. As communications technology developed, and broadcast news achieved primacy in its speed and reach, the BBC was often regarded as hostile by governments in difficulty.

¹ *Radio Times* 30 November 1923

Putting impartiality in legislative clothing in one sense has protected the BBC from assault by those with either power or money. It has also made the BBC seem apologetic at times about a legal constraint. But it is not a question of saying ‘we’re required to be impartial’ – rather, ‘we *are* impartial. That’s what the BBC is’.

Impartiality should define the BBC brand. Could any other organisation in crisis have reported so dispassionately and unflinchingly on itself as *Panorama* did after the Gilligan/Kelly affair – or indeed as BBC news and current affairs programmes did daily throughout the Hutton Inquiry? Far from being imposed on the BBC, impartiality has been conceived by the BBC. It is the foundation of its reputation around the world. In the ever greater fragmentation of the media kaleidoscope, broadcasters may struggle to maintain their distinct identity. This is not the moment for the BBC to compromise its brand. But impartiality remains an evolutionary process, and, as this Report demonstrates, it has an important and stimulating role to play in a more diverse society, where many of the old certainties and shared assumptions have melted away.

It may be that, in other parts of the electronic media, impartiality itself becomes one of those melting assumptions. That will only make the BBC more distinctive. As a former Director of News and Current Affairs, Ian Hargreaves, says: ‘Impartiality is the BBC’s USP. It needs impartiality to survive.’ But it has to be more than a mantra. It must be both rigorous and thoughtful. Impartiality matters.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE TWO

Impartiality is an essential part of the BBC's contract with its audience, which owns and funds the BBC. Because of that, the audience itself will sometimes be a factor in determining impartiality.

The most precious prize that the BBC can win is the trust of its audience. Without that trust, the BBC would be a broken reed.

The audience understands perfectly well what impartiality is. When the Sparkler researchers began their work, they imagined they would need to use alternative words to express it – fairness, lack of bias, balance – even though none of these is a synonym. In the event, the audience groups grasped the concept straightaway.

They regarded the BBC generally as impartial, and felt very strongly that it should be. ‘This view’, the research report states, ‘was based on what the BBC is. Given it is funded by the licence fee, the BBC should be representative of the nation and this should be true of the services it offers, and right through to the setting of its news agenda.’¹ They believed it applied most directly in news and current affairs, with its core elements being neutrality, open-mindedness and distance.² But they did not see it as requiring uniform application across all output.³ The aims of impartiality in their view were to provide trustworthy and accurate information and to encourage an atmosphere of inclusion and respect.

Now that the audience is more frequently contributing to output, as well as simply receiving it and reacting to it, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the weight of this involvement should affect impartiality judgments. This was explored at the September seminar. Jeremy Vine had come hot-foot from his lunchtime show on Radio 2, which has a high level of audience participation. He said how important it was not to distort the balance of audience opinion in the interests of ‘fairness’, and quoted an example from that day’s programme: an item on raising the age of criminality for young offenders from 10 to 14. The programme’s even-handed coverage of the issue contrasted with the tide of reaction by text, fax and email, which showed overwhelming opposition to the idea. ‘Our item was not balanced because the centre of gravity of the item was not where the centre of gravity of the audience was. So, we tried for balance and I would contend we got it wrong.’

Melanie Howard, of the Future Foundation, argued that it was important to assess where the mainstream of opinion was going, and said recent research showed that in all the ‘advancing affluent democracies’ there was a move to ‘greater liberalism, greater adherence to the idea of individuality and self-expression’.

Steve Barnett, of the University of Westminster, pointed to a danger in ‘elevating the audience that responds to these programmes and assuming that they are somehow representative of the audience in general’.

¹ *Informing the Direction of BBC Impartiality for the Digital Age: Qualitative Research Report* (Sparkler) page 40 (see Appendix B)

² see Guiding Principle Five, page 42

³ see Guiding Principle Six, page 47

Claire Fox, of the Institute of Ideas, was concerned about the reliance on the audience. 'You seem to want to court them. Surely the job of journalism is sometimes (shock horror) to challenge the audience, to actually make them think what they didn't think before. If you're just going to give them a mirror back of themselves, or repeat what you think will make you popular with them, you're dishonouring the audience, and it shows a lack of nerve in journalism.'

Peter Horrocks, Head of Television News, argued that interactivity with the audience helped the BBC to be 'more open-minded – to challenge our thinking and to get away from the group-think'. Audience response could be a new piece of journalistic information, as happened in a recent story about proposed changes in the law on violent pornography on the internet. 'Our broad assumption was that most people would be welcoming that change.' But a lot of the Newsbeat audience texted in to say that 'actually they quite enjoyed sado-masochistic pornography on the internet – there wasn't real violence involved and they found it largely harmless. That was an important view which we hadn't thought about, which we subsequently included within our 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock news pieces.'

Jeremy Vine felt that impartiality and interactivity didn't mix. 'We have this great patronising idea that we're going to invite listeners into the back of the car, and we're going to take them somewhere. But they want the steering-wheel. They want to take control. Now what do we do?'

Helen Boaden, Director of News, said what was interesting was the degree to which everyone was challenged with equal rigour, 'and that's why I think interactivity and impartiality sit together very happily'.

The issue here is whether impartiality is being measured in the topic itself, or in the expression of audience response. Clearly, if the audience is selected on a 50:50 basis, when the real balance of respondents has been 90:10, that is a misrepresentation – and may be taken as showing favouritism to the minority view. On the other hand, there is a duty to keep the debate open for members of the audience who have not made contact, whether by electronic messaging or the more traditional phone-in, and the presenter in such a case should invite responses in support of the minority view.

One of the BBC's purposes is to represent the UK to itself¹, and it is important that, over the whole of the BBC's output, it is a picture that the audience recognises from its own experience. This will not be the case in every programme, but if the audience feels that the output as a whole presents an incomplete, exaggerated or unrealistic picture, its trust in the BBC will start to fade. The Sparkler research shows that the audience is salutarly alert to and frustrated by political correctness.² It also has a keen sense of geographical bias, with most respondents outside south-east England feeling under-represented. 'The BBC's homeland was seen to be in London' and this was reflected in programmes, presenters and news coverage.

¹ The BBC's public purposes are listed on page 71 and at Appendix E

² See Guiding Principle Six, page 47

The need for a periodic reality-check applies as much in *The Archers* and *Casualty* as it does in documentaries and current affairs. Reality is of course complex and kaleidoscopic in its variety, and allows great scope for creativity and imagination. But if the reality anchor is not there, then the audience may suspect that it is being required to view the world through tinted spectacles.

Judgments of impartiality cannot be delegated to the audience alone. Although there will be times when a strong audience reaction gives content-providers pause for re-consideration, there will be others when a breach of impartiality provokes no specific complaints. Sometimes there will be equally strong protests from opposite directions, but that does not mean they necessarily cancel each other out, or that the BBC ‘has got it about right’. It could well represent a double dose of error. There are sharply-polarised situations (such as the Israeli-Palestinian one) where protests from both sides are more reassuring than protests from either one. But it cannot be assumed that all criticisms have equal validity, or that one side or the other has not manufactured criticism pre-emptively, to prevent the BBC siding with its opponents. Nor does a lack of audience reaction indicate that the item was not worth doing. The BBC must make its own editorial judgments, and not be driven solely by audience reaction.

Increasingly important in these judgments is the material contributed by ‘citizen-journalists’ among the audience. UGC needs careful scrutiny, and, when such pictures or sound are used, the source must be clearly labelled, visually or verbally, in every case – as the current online guidance recommends.¹ But, so long as normal editorial standards about both provenance and motivation are rigorously applied, the universal availability of such pictures can only be welcomed as an extra (sometimes the main) ingredient in reporting a story. Indeed, it may uncover a truth that was otherwise hidden – as for instance in the case of the mobile phone video of Saddam Hussein’s execution. Only a few years ago, such intrusive pictures might not have been broadcast: today’s editorial decisions have to be made in the knowledge that material may already be circulating on the internet.

UGC circulating on the internet cannot always be legally reproduced. The small print on MySpace and YouTube, for instance, makes clear that the ownership of material on their sites is vested in the person who posted it. In the Virginia Tech murders of April 2007, the blogs which students had published on the internet were reproduced in news programmes, even though some of these students seemed to regard this as invasive activity by the professional media. But, on the other hand, such blogs – already quite journalistic in their approach – could become competitive for the media’s attention. This would only add to the pressures on accuracy, verification and impartiality. In the case of the Virginia Tech shootings, live pictures of the event were not offered by witnesses on their mobile phones, but it can only be a matter of time before such offers become commonplace.

The dramatic pictures (the first in daylight) fed live from a mobile phone into *Breakfast* the morning after the Cumbria train crash in February 2007 came from a BBC reporter: but they could have been offered (as UGC) by an unknown member of the public. In that case, would the BBC newsroom have taken them live, without any chance to check their authenticity? And what

¹ www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/videoaudioandstills

would happen if the pictures were equally dramatic, but of a much less verifiable event than a train crash? If the BBC were to turn them down, then they would surely appear on another outlet within minutes. Yet the BBC's online editorial guidance understandably requires checks on the provenance of such material, and there is no sure way of telling whether the member of the public is using a mobile in Telford or Torbay, let alone Tenerife. This area of newsgathering is changing so fast that the Guidelines do need regular updating to deal with questions of discretion over the sourcing of pictures. Currently the presumption is that UGC will not be put live on air, but with increasing numbers of people adept at handling this aspect of mobile phone technology, is this presumption sustainable? How can the BBC process the sheer volume of UGC that is now coming its way? How should regional newsrooms with limited resources handle this? Even a relatively light snowfall in January produced 12,000 different pieces of UGC in one day – and this is just the beginning. Can the BBC realistically afford to be behind other outlets in screening pictures from a major news event, on the basis that it could not verify the messenger? Editorial judgments in this area could be high-risk.

Every member of the public now has the potential to be a reporter, because everyone (just about) has the technology, and – more important – everyone has an outlet. Whether or not a broadcaster accepts his or her UGC, it will often be uploaded onto the internet within minutes. BBC newsrooms (nationally and locally) need expanded resources to cope with the sheer volume of these UGC offers – and the sensible guidelines currently in force will need continual updating in the light (and heat) of experience.

The BBC has developed a much looser process in handling audience material on its online and 'red button' interactive forums. It is important to ensure that children's forums are moderated, but opinion should be largely unrestricted and self-regulated on other sites, provided that contributions conform with the law, and do not cause offence on grounds of taste or decency. However, there needs to be close liaison between programme areas and interactive forums, to ensure that, if intervention is needed on grounds of impartiality, it can be effected without delay.

The Sparkler research shows that the audience regards the rawness of free debate and discussion as belonging to the ideal of impartiality, which would be undermined by BBC interference in the form of moderating or editing contributors' views.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE THREE

Impartiality must continue to be applied to matters of party political or industrial controversy. But in today's more diverse political, social and cultural landscape, it requires a wider and deeper application.

Long ago the BBC evolved elaborate mechanisms for ensuring its own neutrality in reporting party politics, particularly during election time. As Andrew Marr, its former political editor, observed at the September seminar, these are 'fiddly, but not difficult'. The BBC's impartiality is now part of the scenery during a general election – accepted, expected and taken for granted. It has evolved over some twenty-two general elections, from a time (before the advent of universal suffrage) when the campaign did not acknowledge broadcasting at all and the BBC was required to abstain from any coverage, to the position now when the campaign barely exists beyond radio, television and other electronic media.

Today's political and cultural landscape has changed dramatically from that of even twenty-five years ago. Party politics at Westminster is much less sharply defined: the Liberal Democrats have changed their name and become more numerous, and both Labour and the Conservatives have substantially changed their spots. There is a much lower level of party affiliation among the public, and voter turnout in general elections has been in sharp decline. The Westminster Parliament is less esteemed, and now competes for attention with other centres of democratic expression – in Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and Strasbourg – as well as with alternative forms of political discourse – on the internet and in the media.

There was a time when it was thought improper for current issues to be debated on the BBC ahead of Parliament. In its early days, *Panorama* managed to overturn that nostrum. But for many years afterwards, Parliament retained some supremacy. Robin Day, for instance, was reluctant to host political debates on *The World at One* in the late 1970s without their being anchored to views already expressed in Parliament. The press adopted a similar approach: the broadsheets would print extensive extracts from speeches in the House of Commons in a way that would seem laborious or deferential today, and opinionated political columns – now so commonplace – were few and far between.

The BBC is still required to provide dedicated coverage of Parliament¹, alone of any non-specialist outlet in print or broadcasting. Its coverage of politics, both practical and theoretical (as described in the Editorial Guidelines) is conceived in essentially parliamentary terms. That may explain the difficulty it sometimes has in addressing opinion that has not emerged through Parliament or other formal institutions, as the BBC's Europe Editor, Mark Mardell, pointed out. The fuel protests in 2000 were an example of this – an elastic and elusive movement which had no institutional basis. Yet for a while it was an undeniably potent political force.

Another instance was the success of UKIP in the 2004 elections for the European Parliament, which arguably caught the BBC on the hop. UKIP had no representation in Parliament, and therefore no institutional profile to give credibility to its central policy – British withdrawal from the EU. Although some of its members were interviewed, the BBC editorially was taken aback by the level of support it attracted. This contrasted sharply with

¹ Framework Agreement 2006, section 7

the emergence two decades earlier of another new party, the Social Democratic Party. In that case, the BBC knew exactly how to handle it, because from day one the SDP had MPs and peers in place, defectors from the Labour Party. It had instant institutional validity and plenty of spokesmen/women with labels.

The task for content-providers, in escaping this institutional bias, is to get out more, and devote more time to exploring the undercurrents of opinion through broader reading and listening, and broader personal contacts.

Impartiality in party politics and matters of political controversy remains critical if the BBC is to fulfil its primary public purpose, ‘sustaining citizenship and civil society’. It is fundamental to public service broadcasting. But the growth of inter-party agreement at Westminster and unofficial cross-party alliances – whether on the invasion of Iraq, the funding of higher education, the detention of terrorist suspects, or global warming – complicates the impartiality equation. There are many issues where to hear ‘both sides of the case’ is not enough: there are many more shades of opinion to consider. Indeed, the principal linkage of impartiality to ‘matters of party political or industrial controversy’ has a very dated feel to it: there are many other areas where controversy is now much fiercer.

Official bi- (or tri-) partisan policy in Parliament has in the past been cited as a reason not to open up arguments. It happened in the case of the Army’s role in Northern Ireland, in immigration policy, in the 1975 referendum on membership of the EEC, and until quite recently in counter-terrorism policy. Parliamentary consensus is sometimes mentioned today to deflect calls for a full debate about capital punishment, even though parliamentary and public opinion have long been at odds. But Parliament can no longer expect to define the parameters of national debate: it can sometimes instigate it, but more often it has to respond to currents of opinion already flowing freely on the internet and in the media. The world no longer waits on parliamentary utterance, and parliamentary consensus should never stifle the debate of topical issues on the BBC – because it does not always correspond with the different strands of public opinion.

There is perhaps a different impartiality issue in politics which was inconceivable when the rubrics on party politics were first devised – and that is the extent to which the media encourage cynicism about the whole political and parliamentary process. Targeted political satire, as expressed over the decades by *That Was The Week That Was*, *Week Ending*, or Rory Bremner, is an important part of a self-confident democracy. But is it legitimate to assume that all politicians are by definition dishonest, self-serving and base – whether this is expressed in scatter-gun gags by comedians, or knowing asides by Jeremy Paxman? Is such casual cynicism healthy – or is there a price to be paid for easy laughs? Although news and current affairs programmes implicitly acknowledge the supremacy of the parliamentary process, there is sometimes too glib a scepticism about anything said by politicians which contrasts sharply with a simple (credulous, in Janet Daley’s view) acceptance of utterances by spokesmen/women for pressure groups or charities.

The analysis of motive remains an essential part of political reporting, but surely even politicians can sometimes be credited with an ounce of altruism or honesty, just as people who work for charities or quangos should not be automatically presumed to be devoid of personal or corporate ambition. The unthinking repetition of clichés can be corrosive – and

partial. H.L. Mencken's famous remark that the proper relationship of a journalist to a politician is that of a dog to a lamp-post is better treated as an aphorism than as a BBC rule of thumb.

While continuing a thorough and conscientious job of reporting both Houses of Parliament, and the other democratic institutions within the UK, the BBC should not always feel beholden to the parliamentary model. Just as *Question Time* now explores the extra-parliamentary arena for its panels, so other programmes should feel less tied to the ritual of a parliamentary framework for the proper scrutiny of political issues and decisions.

Public interest in politics today is not necessarily expressed through the party political system: in the broadband age, opinion has fragmented. The internet and weblogs have enabled people of shared opinions to join forces much more easily: in the world of online petitions, thousands of people can join campaigns in less time than it used to take to paint a one-word placard. A consumer survey released in the European Parliament in 2006 showed (remarkably, on the face of it) that nearly a quarter of the populations in the USA, the UK and France, read blogs at least once a week – and nearly one-third of that group (or nearly three million people, in the case of the UK) are moved to take some type of political action.¹ Some of the smarter politicians at Westminster are beginning to realise this: we have already begun to see them joining, or conniving with, campaigns which are ostensibly targeting their own policies. We may expect to see more cabinet ministers in demonstrations. Downing Street has encouraged single-issue petitions on its website, and seems intent on continuing the idea, despite the potential embarrassment of more than a million and a half 'signatures' in opposition to its preferred policy of road-pricing. The strictest impartiality provisions have traditionally applied to party politics. In the broadband age of joined-up citizenship, similar vigilance will be needed over single-issue campaigns and lobby groups – which, in the view of Richard Klein, Commissioner of Documentaries, pose 'the greatest threat to impartiality'.

It is an essential part of the BBC's journalistic role to hold those with power and responsibility to account, and in politics that includes the opposing as well as the governing parties. But it should never arrogate to itself the role of 'the Opposition'. There are those in the international media who regard themselves as the sole bastions of freedom and justice against (as they see it) the overweening follies of Washington. There is not a shred of impartiality in such a position, and the BBC has no place in such company.

Although other opinion surveys have previously recorded a minority view of an anti-Conservative bias on the BBC, it was notable that none of the participants in the Sparkler audience research discussed impartiality domestically in terms of party politics. They seemed to regard that as sorted. They saw it more in relation to the community, in respect of race and, in particular, religion. Admittedly, the research was conducted during last summer's parliamentary recess, in the aftermath of the fighting in Lebanon between the Israeli army and Hezbollah forces, and of the terror alert at Heathrow. But their sensitivities were revealing.

¹ StrategyOne omnibus survey (September 2006). Sample: 1002 respondents in the UK, 940 in France, 1000 in the USA and 937 in Belgium

I think the BBC is too politically correct. The BBC were saying: ‘21 men have been arrested’ and I thought, ‘what’s happening?’ So I flicked over to Sky, and it says, ‘21 Asian men have been arrested’. Other news channels tell you what you need to know, they don’t hide it. *White man, West Midlands*

I wanted to know who these terrorists were, exactly where they lived. We’re all labelled as one. They keep saying ‘Asians’. Obviously Al-Qaeda are Muslims, but we’re Sikhs and Hindus and we’re getting the backlash as well. They can’t just say ‘21 Pakis were arrested’. They have to word it differently, but we need to know. *Asian woman, West Midlands*

This audience research demonstrates how conscious the public is of the impartiality challenges posed by a more diverse social and cultural community. This is partly about the integration of different ethnic and cultural groups within British society – particularly as affected by assertive religious belief. But it is also about social shifts such as our ageing population, the decline of marriage and traditional family structures, the growth of affluence, and a greater individualism. If the BBC does not understand and absorb these changes in society, it cannot hope to be impartial.

Impartiality today requires a greater subtlety in covering and counterpointing the varied shades of opinion – and arguably always should have done. Whereas opinion used to be balanced in simple alternatives – and could be measured in tilts of the seesaw or swings of the pendulum – nowadays a more appropriate metaphor might be the many spokes of the wagon wheel, particularly the three-dimensional television graphic developed for cricket coverage to illustrate the trajectories (both plan and elevation) of balls hit by batsmen. The wheel is not exactly circular, it has a shifting centre, the ‘spokes’ are not necessarily evenly spaced, nor do they all reach the edge of the wheel, nor does one ‘spoke’ necessarily point in a directly opposite direction to another. So opinion is not confined to ‘left’ and ‘right’ but ranges through 360 degrees. One opinion is not necessarily the exact opposite of another, nor do they all reach the extremity of available argument.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOUR

Impartiality is about breadth of view, and can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on the centre ground.

There is in the nightly audience every order of social class, every grade of educational and intellectual attainment, every variety of like and dislike, taste and distaste, on every conceivable subject. To the same audience, every night, a different programme [schedule] has to be transmitted. A theatre has the same performance and a different audience night after night.
John Reith, 'Broadcast over Britain', 1924

An evening at the theatre may not be the most obvious comparator for broadcasting schedules of the 21st century. But the diversity of Reith's (no longer captive) audience has only increased. The continuing changes in British society mean that many of the assumptions about the boundaries of a national consensus of attitudes and aspirations should be jettisoned. The parameters of 'normality' and 'extremism' have shifted. The cultural mainstream is often not where programme-makers think it is – and there may be more than one.

A further complication here is that broadcasters are not always keen to be swimming in the mainstream anyway. The offbeat, the eccentric, the new is usually more stimulating.

Andrew Marr, in his presentation to the September seminar, quoted the words of the Ullswater parliamentary committee in 1936: 'There's an inevitable tendency in the general programmes of the Corporation to devote more time to the expression of new ideas and the advocacy of change in social and other spheres than the defence of orthodoxy and stability, since the reiteration of what exists and is familiar is not so interesting as the exposition of what might be.' As Marr pointed out, 'Any producer, any reporter worth their salt wants to go for newness, challenge, controversy – and the problem we have as the BBC is to remember that out there, there are great swathes of opinion that don't feel like this and who feel that something slightly urban, edgy, youthful, alien and sometimes distasteful is being shoved at them.'

The BBC and its rivals make many successful efforts to think 'outside the box'. Channel 4, after all, was set up to experiment with the form and content of programmes, and its refreshing alternative approach has spread to other channels. But a pattern of simple iconoclasm, mixed with revisionist history for the sake of it, has sometimes resulted in a new conformity.

The way to adjust to the changes and increased diversity in British society is to reach for two particular bottles on the alchemist's shelf: Openmindedness and Completeness. *Newsnight's* recent experiment with audience-made films suggests an awareness that the agenda of the audience may be broader than that of programme-makers – and certainly different.

David Jordan, Controller Editorial Policy, said what was required was a diversity of viewpoint, and that the evidence showed a belief in the audience that 'we sometimes don't take into account certain sorts of views and we exclude them not just from audience programmes but from reports as well.

Those people then feel that we're not impartial but we're biased. We're conducting a bias of omission by leaving them out.' He said these were often people with 'socially authoritarian' views.

Peter Horrocks welcomed 'the audience's surprising and unusual views, but it shouldn't be about saying, "because the audience is socially authoritarian or reactionary on this story or that story, therefore that's where we need to be"'. It was a new piece of journalistic information. The important thing was to focus on what was right editorially, rather than worry about what impact the journalism had on the audience.

Some of those who accuse the BBC of lacking impartiality complain that its programme-makers think they are on the centre ground, when in reality they aren't. This criticism assumes that the centre ground is where impartiality should pitch its tent. But this is a mistaken assumption.

The centre is often the wrong place to be. It can be a danger zone. There may be some issues of simply-polarised argument – 'all those in favour, all those against' – where impartial programme-makers and presenters may legitimately sit in the middle of the seesaw (as long as they really are in the middle), as neutral arbiters and observers. But far more often the centre ground is the most populated area of debate, and in impartiality there is no safety in numbers.

Centrists can be people of muddled views or of none. But they can also be people making a definite statement, opposed to the extremes of the argument, or attracted by elements from both or all sides. So programme-makers who favour the centre can be just as partial as if they were out on a wing. The centre is not even a good place from which to view the wings – they can seem a long way off, and craning the neck to see them can result in a distorted picture. The impartial programme-maker should be on the move, travelling to different wings of the argument (and there will be more than two) as well as the centre – not to stay there, but to be able to observe people square on and close up, and see the world from over their shoulders.

It is not always a question of political or social argument. There are sectors of the population which lie outside the experience of many programme-makers. Without direct knowledge of (say) people who earn their living from the land, or pensioners, or members of working men's clubs, there can be a temptation to rely on single labels or clichés, which ignore the complexity of opinions and attitudes within those groups. Even to talk of 'pensioners' as a single group is misleading: now that it is common for people to live 25-30 years beyond retirement, they should be seen as just as multifarious in their interests, opinions and needs as the working population – indeed some of them may still be in employment.

An open-minded search for completeness does not entail equal space for every shade of argument or attitude. But it should involve *some* space, provided that the points of view are rationally and honestly held, and all of them are subject to equal scrutiny. Sometimes they may be disagreeable or distasteful to the programme-maker, but that should not be evident in the output.

At the same time, he or she needs to have a sense of where the preponderance of opinion lies on any issue: if viewers or listeners within the preponderance cannot detect that awareness, they will feel alienated and mistrustful. It is the challenge for the content-provider to calibrate the range of views and their proportionate weight in the output. This should be done by assessing the balance of opinion issue by issue, as the general public tends to do, rather than by world view, overarching philosophy or party grouping. To do this, programme-makers need to have their roots in the wider community (not just in their own circle): they need to read widely, keep abreast of the range of broadcasting output, explore the internet – and keep listening.

As Director-General in the 1960s, Sir Hugh Greene substantially broadened the BBC's view with such programmes as *That Was The Week That Was*, *Cathy Come Home* and *Till Death Us Do Part*. But he also took the extraordinary step of banning Mary Whitehouse from the BBC airwaves, for daring to criticise the amount of sex and violence it was screening. It was an abuse of his personal power, let alone of her human rights. The fact that such a ban is unimaginable today shows how far society has moved – not least with the democratising force of the internet – since those so-called permissive days.

When David Loyn reported for *Newsnight* in October 2006 from inside the stronghold of the Taliban in Afghanistan, questions were asked in Parliament about the BBC's 'unalloyed propaganda' for Britain's enemies. Loyn's straightforward report was justified by the requirement of impartiality to explore the Taliban's motivation, although (as the Falklands War and Northern Ireland have demonstrated) impartiality becomes particularly controversial when the lives of British servicemen and women are at stake in one side of the fighting. But Peter Horrocks observes that News' experience of audiences is that 'they are remarkably smart at thinking for themselves. It is often politicians and special interest groups that proceed on the basis that the public needs to be protected from powerful views'¹ – just as it was back in 1926.

David Dimbleby's interview on the night of the 2006 local elections with Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party, was another demonstration of impartiality. The BNP had doubled its number of councillors in England. Instead of the disapproving tone in which the party is often reported, Dimbleby took a forensic approach in exploring the policy discrepancies between Nick Griffin's statements and the BNP website. The interview implicitly acknowledged that it was a legitimate party, for which many people in Barking and Dagenham had voted – but, just like any other legitimate party, it could expect to have its policy platform rigorously examined. A similar approach was taken by Paddy O'Connell in his interview with the BNP leader on *Broadcasting House* in January 2007.

There may be those who argue that a party which, despite its legitimacy, is distasteful to most of the audience should not be given 'the oxygen of publicity'. We have been there before – and the precedent is not encouraging. Refusing to give airtime to 'unpleasant' parts of the democratic process

¹ *Finding TV News' lost audience* (Lecture at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism) November 2006

creates resentment among sympathisers, drives the support underground, and may well strengthen it. It is certainly not impartial.

A historian who denies or downplays the Holocaust may cause distress to many in the audience. Impartiality does not require an interview with David Irving every week of the year – or indeed every year – but Holocaust-denial is not a crime in Britain, and it is legitimate every now and then to challenge a maverick in person. The BBC does not and should not suppress or end the discussion – particularly in the light of the massive support recorded by the Ipsos-MORI survey for the notion that broadcasters ‘should report on all views and opinions, however unpopular or extreme some of them may be’. 83% agreed with this, as against only 6% who disagreed.

Climate change is another subject where dissenters can be unpopular. There may be now a broad scientific consensus that climate change is definitely happening, and that it is at least predominantly man-made. But the second part of that consensus still has some intelligent and articulate opponents, even if a small minority.

Jana Bennett, Director of Television, argued at the seminar that ‘as journalists, we have the duty to understand where the weight of the evidence has got to. And that is an incredibly important thing in terms of public understanding – equipping citizens, informing the public as to what’s going to happen or not happen possibly over the next couple of hundred years.’

Roger Mosey, Director of Sport, said that in his former job as head of TV News, he had been lobbied by scientists ‘about what they thought was a disproportionate number of people denying climate change getting on our airwaves and being part of a balanced discussion – because they believe, absolutely sincerely, that climate change is now scientific fact.

The BBC has held a high-level seminar with some of the best scientific experts, and has come to the view that the weight of evidence no longer justifies equal space being given to the opponents of the consensus. But these dissenters (or even sceptics) will still be heard, as they should, because it is not the BBC’s role to close down this debate. They cannot be simply dismissed as ‘flat-earthers’ or ‘deniers’, who ‘should not be given a platform’ by the BBC. Impartiality always requires a breadth of view: for as long as minority opinions are coherently and honestly expressed, the BBC must give them appropriate space. ‘Bias by elimination’ is even more offensive today than it was in 1926. The BBC has many public purposes of both ambition and merit – but joining campaigns to save the planet is not one of them. The BBC’s best contribution is to increase public awareness of the issues and possible solutions through impartial and accurate programming. Acceptance of a basic scientific consensus only sharpens the need for hawk-eyed scrutiny of the arguments surrounding both causation and solution. It remains important that programme-makers relish the full range of debate that such a central and absorbing subject offers, scientifically, politically and ethically, and avoid being misrepresented as standard-bearers. The wagon wheel remains a model shape. But the trundle of the bandwagon is not a model sound.

Recent history is littered with examples of where the mainstream has moved away from the prevailing consensus. Monetarism was regarded in the mid-1970s as an eccentric, impractical enthusiasm of right-wing economists – today it is a central feature of every British

government's economic policy. Euro-scepticism was once belittled as a small-minded, blinkered view of extremists on both left and right: today it is a powerful and influential force which has put pro-Europeans under unaccustomed pressure. Multiculturalism was for years seen by many in Britain as the only respectable policy for managing the problems posed by immigration – over the past two years it has been much harder to find people in public life who support it. Programme-makers need to treat areas of consensus with proper scepticism and rigour. So often those in the media who think they are in the mainstream find that the river of public discourse has cut a new channel, and left them stranded in oxbow lakes.

Suddenly the liberal consensus has discovered there's a bit of a problem about this cultural diversity business. So these people who think that they are the truthful middle ground, actually a lot of the time they're all rushing one way on the ship, then they're all rushing the other way on the ship. They think that *other* people are the people with different views, and *they're* the ones that have always got it right.

Dorothy Byrne, Head of News and Current Affairs, Channel 4

Breadth of view extends beyond radio and television programmes themselves. Content-providers now aim to extend their impact with ancillary multi-media content, creating 'media ripples' in the shape of chat, blogs, fan sites, reviews and so on. The BBC's policy on its own website is, in the interests of impartiality, to refer people to other relevant websites without making value-judgments, provided that the websites concerned are of dependable and accountable provenance, and not in breach of the law.

'If broadcasting is to present a reflection of its time, it must include matters which are in dispute. If it is to hold public interest, it must express living thought. If it is to educate public opinion, it must look upon the questions of the hour from many angles.' Range and relevance were priorities too for the Ullswater Committee, as it considered the first renewal of the BBC's Charter in 1936.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE FIVE

Impartiality is no excuse for insipid programming. It allows room for fair-minded, evidence-based judgments by senior journalists and documentary-makers, and for controversial, passionate and polemical arguments by contributors and writers.

‘Neutrality’, ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘distance’ – these are the three concepts which, according to the Sparkler research, the audience most expects from impartiality. The majority opinion was that distance is a good thing, allowing both perspective and openness to a range of views. But a minority felt that reality is reflected only by ‘being at the heart of things’. These audience perceptions of the merits of distance (both intellectual and geographical) are closely related to the ongoing debate among BBC journalists about the extent to which reporters should involve and identify themselves with the problems and people they are covering. Should reporters, as Michael Buerk disapprovingly puts it, ‘emote’ rather than analyse? Do florid expressions such as ‘Fear stalks the streets of southern Beirut’ have any place in news reports by BBC correspondents? Should presenters who attend the Oscars ceremony get transfixed by the glitz and become rubbernecks on the audience’s behalf, in an impartiality-free zone?

The quantitative survey by Ipsos-MORI backed up the Sparkler findings. Open-mindedness by broadcasters was regarded as either vital or very important by 86% of the public, and the equivalent figure for staying neutral, ‘not giving their own view, however difficult that is’, was 80%. Distance, ‘not getting too close to the issue reported on’, came lower down the scale, with a figure of 65%.

This Report largely avoids the word ‘neutrality’, because the word itself carries so much baggage. The Sparkler respondents were using the word to mean ‘not having a point of view’ – but does ‘point of view’ mean a personal opinion or a professional judgment? Neutrality is certainly acceptable in the sense of ‘not taking sides’ – as is required of a football referee, but in broadcasting terms that concept of neutrality may often relate only to the chairing of discussions (or ‘offering a forum for a range of views’, as the Sparkler report has it). Programme-makers are rightly wary of neutrality if it requires them forever to sit on the fence, repeating the mantra, ‘on the one hand... on the other...’. Programmes would be bland, and sometimes pointless, if they were never able to reach conclusions based on evidence. It would rule out investigative reporting for a start. The Charter specifically states that ‘due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue’.

The contemporary world is so awash with both unmediated information and opinion that impartiality interpreted as a bloodless neutrality might indeed sink without trace or tears. But the danger for programme-makers steeped in impartiality has always been that they are so busy seeing all sides of every issue that they become social and political eunuchs, who have lost the drive to see right, justice, freedom, truth prevail¹. Without that passion, they and their programmes become colourless and insipid. Content-providers should not be encouraged, in the interests of ‘neutrality’, to sever themselves from the day-by-day

¹ Andrew Marr, in his introduction to the September seminar, remarked that ‘the first thing that happens to you as a BBC journalist is that you’re taken down into a dank basement to have your trousers pulled down and your organs of opinion removed with a pair of secateurs by the Director-General and popped in a formaldehyde bottle. You’re told you’re allowed them back when you leave.’

experience and concerns of their own audiences, let alone from fundamental democratic principles. But their involvement, and conclusions, should always be driven by the evidence, by an open mind and by reality – and not by personal opinion or institutional assumption.

This is not to say that, in every report or programme on the BBC, there has to be a judgment or a conclusion. It is still of the utmost importance that different points of view are given expression, without the heavy hand of BBC judgment. Indignation (for instance when discussing Guantanamo Bay) is usually not a proper weapon in the hands of interviewers. The role of the BBC is not to tell its audiences what to think, but to give them the information to make up their own minds. An experienced correspondent or documentary director, however, may legitimately anticipate the reasonable question from viewers or listeners: ‘Well, after setting out the evidence, and living with this issue for so long, what do *you* think?’ – provided it is in effect another insight to help them reach their own conclusion. There is nothing wrong in valuing expertise, and there is still nothing wrong in the ambition to change people’s understanding of the world – but through evidence rather than assertion.

Problems arise, particularly during live two-ways, when reporters or correspondents are speaking outside their area of expertise. Visiting reporters should avoid being drawn into judgments about situations or places with which they have only a passing acquaintance. The Neil Report set out wise parameters for the conduct of two-ways, which have become much more common since the advent of 24-hour news, and the BBC’s journalists need to be regularly reminded of these.¹ Even within his or her area of expertise, a specialist correspondent or editor has to tread warily: every judgment made in the Israeli-Palestinian situation, for instance, is fraught with difficulty, and is parsed in minute detail by specialists and apologists in the audience. But the policy of using the accumulated expertise of editor-correspondents, whether in the Middle East or Europe – or in business or sport reporting – is sensible, provided that reporters without the same experience do not presume to make equivalent judgments. Those editor-correspondents would be well-advised, in an age of easy electronic transfer of information (let alone Freedom of Information access), to regard the private judgments they make for their BBC colleagues as being, in effect, in the public domain. Perceptions of impartiality are almost as important as impartiality itself.

With that in mind, the BBC should reinforce the authority and impartiality of its frontline journalistic talent (as well as that off-screen and off-mic) by ensuring that the rules agreed by the Board of Governors, and emphasised by the Neil Report², should be applied with greater consistency. The thrust of these is that no BBC staff journalist should write newspaper columns dealing with current affairs or matters of current public policy debate or political or industrial controversy. The same rule applies to most news and current affairs freelance presenters and reporters in the journalism area. This rule is designed to protect their impartiality and authority from being vitiated by the expression of their personal views. The Sparkler research shows that the audience is fully aware of the danger that reporters who become ‘opinion merchants’ can ‘undermine their impartial credentials and those of the organisation as a whole’.³ Whether for blogs or for articles in the press, it is a case of

¹ *The BBC’s Journalism after Hutton*, Report of a Review Team chaired by Ron Neil, June 2004, p16 (Appendix G)

² pp 16-17

³ Sparkler research (p28), Appendix B

adapting words usually attributed to Voltaire: 'I may agree with what you have to say but I oppose to the death your right to say it'.

The recent example of a feature article by a BBC News presenter in the *Daily Mirror*, headlined 'Why the World Needs Hillary', is a reminder of why the rules about external journalism by BBC personnel remain so important.¹ The apparent endorsement of one presidential candidate in elections in a country which, in his words, 'now seems seriously off course' could make it hard for that presenter to conduct American political interviews – particularly if interviewees were to quote the article back at him.

There may be a case for re-examining these rules on outside commitments. Articles by programme-makers which point newspaper readers towards a particular BBC programme are normally, and sensibly, permitted. But a separate issue could develop over news reports in the press by BBC correspondents and reporters which have no specific pointer. As newspapers increasingly abandon the once sacred division between facts and opinion – and in some cases fill their entire front pages with attitude – the audience perception of reporters and correspondents in the BBC is growing apart from that of their colleagues in the print media. News reports in the press by BBC journalists, currently permitted in certain instances, may soon become harder to sustain, without compromising their distinctiveness, authority – and impartiality. The editorial processes and values of the BBC and the press are not interchangeable.

When, on BBC output, professional judgment and personal opinion coincide, warning lights should flash.

In 1968, CBS broadcast a news special by the premier American newscaster Walter Cronkite which overturned the reputation for impartiality he and his network had spent years building. During the Tet offensive, he went to Saigon and, in an emotional personal film, pronounced that America was losing the Vietnam War, that a few thousand more troops would not change matters, and that the United States should get out. It shook the White House. President Lyndon Johnson was watching, and declared it a turning point. Walter Cronkite was the one television journalist he respected. If he had lost Cronkite, he said, he had lost Mr Average Citizen.² Shortly afterwards he announced he would not run again for election, though American combat troops stayed in Vietnam for five more years.

The Cronkite story has obvious resonance today. It would be within the competence of a senior BBC correspondent in Baghdad (though probably not of a visiting news anchor) to pronounce the military operation in Iraq 'lost' or 'won', provided this judgment was based on evidence. Knowing how controversial such a judgment would be, a wise correspondent would share the evidence with the audience as far as possible. In that way, even if no names could be given, the audience could be aware of why he or she had reached that conclusion. A bald declaration in the Cronkite style would not be enough on the BBC, and to call for British troops to leave would be to lurch from judgment into personal opinion.

¹ *Daily Mirror* 22 January 2007

² Quoted from David Halberstam *The Powers That Be* (Chatto & Windus 1979)

The constraints on BBC personnel should not inhibit other contributors. Impartiality is a coat of many colours, not of a uniform beige. It must always have space for strong and passionate opinion. The BBC's duty 'ends when we have ensured that the strongest possible speakers are at the microphone. What happens then is their affair. Impartiality does not mean so artificially "balancing" the speakers that the listener can never come to a conclusion on the basis of the argument'. These wise words come from the Director-General in a note dated 31st January 1945.

Channel 4 has, over many years, found room within its own understanding of impartiality for polemics by its contributors. The BBC has traditionally been more wary. BBC Bristol did produce the short-lived *Byline* series fifteen years or so ago, which was a set of personal views by different celebrities on fairly marginal and quirky subjects, and authored programmes on cultural matters have been the norm since *Civilisation* and *The Ascent of Man*. But there is scope to extend opinionated programming more readily into topics that are central to political and social debate: the views can be passionate, but they should be closely-argued and from guest contributors. It needs to be clear to the audience that such programmes are not 'the voice of the BBC', and that over time there is a balance of opinion across the intellectual spectrum.

The current Editorial Guidelines specifically permit contentious authored programmes on certain conditions. They require that authored programmes 'fairly represent opposing viewpoints when appropriate' and that 'a sufficiently broad range of views and perspectives is included in output of a similar type and weight and in an appropriate time frame'¹. Adam Curtis's challenge to American foreign policy in his BBC Two series *The Power of Nightmares* in 2004 has had no equivalent counterblast. It was to some degree offset in 2006 by Peter Taylor's series *The New Al-Qaeda*, which was forensic rather than polemical. The BBC has also pointed to the daily coverage of the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq over several years as providing a counterbalance to Curtis. But it could well be argued that impartial reporting by BBC correspondents in Washington, Baghdad or Helmand province does not involve support for war motives or war aims. Partisan programming is not necessarily balanced by impartiality.

There should be a place within an impartiality framework for one-sidedness in a variety of authored programmes such as the Curtis series, provided that fair-mindedness and accuracy remain, and also that the one-sidedness does not come from only one side. There could be room, for instance, for an authored programme about the War on Terror from an uncompromisingly 'neo-conservative' position.

It should be noted that there were few audience complaints about the Curtis series – quite the opposite. It seems the audience has an appetite for authored programmes. But they should, as the Guidelines advise, be clearly signposted in advance. It would be wise to ensure that the authorship is apparent during the programme – from both the writing and the delivery of the script – and, on television, from seeing the author on screen if possible.

¹ Section 4, page 30

This is all part of the BBC's job to hold the ring in which a multifarious debate can take place. The BBC itself, and its own voices and faces, should not express opinions on controversial matters, but it should be the ringmaster for others to do so.

Tim Gardam, former Director of Programmes at Channel 4, argued strongly at the September seminar for the tradition of rational scepticism – 'the interrogative position testing empirically the arguments of all sides. The wider and more exciting the range of views that are broadcast, the more important it is to hold to that Western tradition of Enlightenment values.'

John Lloyd, of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, talked of 'the journalism of cultural revenge' which was challenging the rational scepticism approach and saying that Anglo-American journalism should no longer have a monopoly, implicit or explicit. 'That specialty comes from the Islamic world – Al-Jazeera is the most obvious one.'

Alan Yentob, Creative Director at the BBC, wondered whether there was enough room in broadcasting (as on blogs or the web) for a diversity of views 'where you're not impeded by interrogation from a journalist. Should the BBC provide more spaces where partial views can be expressed in order to thicken the plot of debate and dialogue?'

Jean Seaton, of the University of Westminster and the BBC's official historian, countered that the BBC had to bring information and judgment 'and a decision to try and get something like the truth. It's not good enough just to hold a ring and let varieties of voice battle it out.'

Justin Webb, BBC Washington correspondent, said that so many Americans got their news from the internet that 'it is now a commonplace in America to believe that all there is in the world is a set of competing opinions. There is not such a thing as judgment that is separate from those opinions.' He argued that simply holding the ring was 'journalism for scaredies. If we think that we have a role and something to say, we should have the guts to say it and stand behind it.'

GUIDING PRINCIPLE SIX

Impartiality applies across all BBC platforms and all types of programme. No genre is exempt. But the way it is applied and assessed will vary in different genres.

Impartiality is a process affecting every area of programming and content. This is clearly set out in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines, at the head of the section on impartiality:

It applies across all of our services and output, whatever the format, from radio news bulletins via our web site to our commercial magazines and includes a commitment to reflecting a diversity of opinion.

Too often impartiality is regarded as a shibboleth for News and Current Affairs. It does of course apply there. It extends to other factual areas: Science, Religion, Arts, History, Documentaries and Natural History. But it also applies in Drama, Children's Programmes, Comedy, Light Entertainment, Sport, Live Events, Education and Music.

Impartiality is required not only in network television and radio, but equally in the nations and regions, local and community radio, and the BBC's online services and interactive sites. It also applies to publications, publicity, marketing and programme trails.

The audience assesses a programme by its content, not its departmental provenance. It makes no allowance for it being produced by Religion rather than Documentaries, by Light Entertainment rather than Live Events, or by Education rather than Current Affairs. Nor does YouTube or Google. Topical, cultural or factual issues arise in all forms of output. Two recent programmes which provoked the fiercest audience reaction, *Jerry Springer – the Opera* and *Celebrity Big Brother* show how explosive entertainment can be when it rubs shoulders with real life.

Journalists in news and current affairs should expect to find their impartiality antennae quivering minute by minute, so it is reasonable for other departments (factual and non-factual) to be guided by their experience and awareness in respect of controversial topical or factual material. But this does not absolve programme-makers in these other genres from discussing impartiality and applying it to their own discipline. The principles are the same: only the application may be different.

Content which involves social, cultural or religious sensitivities will always need consideration. But impartiality also requires a reflection of the full range of the audiences' perspectives, interests and beliefs. As a previous edition of the Guidelines put it, 'representing the whole spectrum is a requirement on all programme genres from arts to news & current affairs, from sport to drama, from comedy to documentaries, from entertainment to education and religion. No significant strand of thought should go unreflected or under-represented on the BBC.'¹

Respondents in the Sparkler audience research had a clear sense that impartiality could not be applied in a uniform way across all genres. They did not want a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. They regarded it as important in News and Current Affairs, as well as consumer

¹ BBC Producer's Guidelines (2000)

affairs, children's programming, and documentaries – although they said it was acceptable for documentaries, after delivering facts impartially, to take a particular angle on a subject. They found it 'harder to relate to impartiality' in entertainment, but said that in all entertainment, particularly comedy and drama, 'impartiality was expected when all the output was considered as a whole, rather than as individual pieces'.

At first sight, **Music** may seem beyond the impartiality remit. Yet, within the mission of relevant channels, the playlists should reflect a wide diversity. Individual disc jockeys may have particular preferences, but the channels as a whole should demonstrate inclusiveness.

When Henry Wood began his Promenade Concerts in 1894, they ranged from Bach to Wagner – a timeline of less than 200 years. That range was gradually extended after the BBC assumed responsibility for the concerts in 1927. For the last thirty years or so the Proms have embraced an 800-year span, with occasional forays into jazz and ethnic music – indeed, the concerts have drawn criticism for not confining themselves to 'the classics'. Yet in the 1960s, when Sir William Glock as Controller Music was responsible for both the Proms and Radio 3, he excluded from both a swathe of 20th century tonal music in favour of the avant-garde and serial compositions which he personally preferred and valued. The late Malcolm Arnold was a particular victim of this. It is arguable that this was a breach of the BBC's impartiality in output that was either subsidised or wholly funded by licence-payers.

The individual passion of presenters or producers gives a channel both flavour and authority: it is up to the controller to ensure the range of such enthusiasms in the output is sufficiently wide. If the whole fiefdom of channel or genre controllers is articulated purely according to personal taste, impartiality is at risk. Breadth of view is essential.

Sport has often had a restricted range. For years, a cheery, feel-good, service of live events and results seemed sufficient, with analysis confined to tactics on the field or the pitch. An occasional programme from outside the genre (in the manner of *Panorama's* undercover film about allegations of illegal 'bung' payments in football) has been a signal that sport has bigger issues to address, and ethical controversies as vigorous as in most other parts of national life. Radio 5 Live has blazed a trail of more investigative, analytical coverage on *Inside Edge*, and the recent appointment of Mihir Bose as Sports Editor in News is a sign of more ambitious purpose. More than perhaps any other programme area, sport involves the BBC in intense competition to secure live broadcasting rights, and it is important that this does not skew impartiality, in terms of honest and accurate reporting.

But sport presents an extra challenge. Far more than with politics or religion, its audience is partisan. It is easy to say that it is not the BBC's role to be cheerleaders for any team, but each local radio station quite rightly identifies itself closely with its own community, and in a Premier League home fixture between Liverpool and Chelsea (say), Radio Merseyside would be drummed out of town if its commentators sat po-faced on the fence. It is legitimate for them to back the home team, but impartiality requires them to be fair-minded in reporting the game, and acknowledging Liverpool's weaknesses as well as Chelsea's strengths. Classic BBC impartiality can be safely reserved for the occasional derby: it would, after all, be a fool of a commentator who sided with either team when Liverpool were playing Everton.

The London Olympics in 2012 will be a serious test. Coverage of international championships has sometimes drawn criticism that the British media are too preoccupied with British competitors. That pull will be all the greater when the Olympic flame reaches British soil in what is likely to be the year of the Queen's diamond jubilee.

There was a foretaste of this during the final stages of London's campaign to host the Games. To what extent should the BBC identify itself with what was becoming, for some, a patriotic cause? The BBC had quite properly been keen to secure the broadcasting rights to the Games. But when it later came under pressure to run short 'public information' films backing the London campaign, that pressure was in the end resisted. Once again, impartiality required a breadth of view: there are some (particularly among those who live and work in London) who are apprehensive about the dislocation of everyday life that the Games may entail. In other quarters, there is alarm at the burgeoning overspend: the original budgeted figure of £2.3 billion has now been controversially revised by the Government to £9.3 billion. Too close an identification with the London 2012 project could inhibit the BBC's proper coverage of these legitimate concerns. Whatever the contractual commitments, the BBC's reporting of the Games and their build-up should remain impartial. A benchmark of impartiality was set during the final phase of the London campaign when *Panorama* ran an investigation entitled 'Buying the Games', exposing corruption within the International Olympic Committee.

Drama often deals with sensitive or controversial contemporary situations. The Editorial Guidelines set out the requirements for accuracy, and the parameters within which a one-sided portrayal can operate.

When drama realistically portrays living people or contemporary situations in a controversial way it has an obligation to be accurate and to do justice to the main facts. If the drama is accurate but is a partisan or partial portrayal of a controversial subject we should normally only proceed if we believe that its insight and excellence justify the platform offered. Even so, we must ensure that its nature is clearly signposted to our audience. When a drama is likely to prove particularly controversial we must consider whether to offer an alternative view in other output on the same service.¹

If the recent drama *The Trial of Tony Blair* had been made for the BBC, rather than for Channel 4, its hypothetical nature might have allowed it to sidestep the guideline. But, under the BBC's understanding of impartiality, its persistent lack of fair-mindedness would have made a BBC transmission difficult. The same argument applied to Channel 4's earlier drama about the Gilligan/Kelly affair, *The Government Inspector*, which prompted these interesting reflections from Mark Lawson in *The Guardian*:

The BBC could not have made it because the Corporation is a central character² but also because there are strict guidelines at White City on the dramatisation of recent fact. The refusal of the Kelly family to cooperate would almost certainly have been enough to stop the project at the BBC but Channel 4 has persevered.

¹ Section 4, p29

² In the view of this Report, an impartial BBC should not necessarily feel this to be a disqualification

And so, in scenes that are hard to watch even for those who weren't related to Kelly, a pale and bearded "Dr Kelly" slips a penknife and his wife's prescription painkillers into the pocket of his Barbour jacket, watches poignantly as "Janice Kelly" pukes into the downstairs loo from the stress of his disgrace, and then walks towards a favourite tree, pausing to look at a cow and a calf he spotted on a previous walk with his daughter.

In the film, there's a moment of silence. But, in our heads, the sirens sound. As with all drama-documentary, the critical cops screech to the scene. The jacket, penknife, pills and tree: OK, we know about those from Hutton. But the vomiting spouse and the sentimental animals: how do we know they were there? And, if they can't prove that this happened, aren't they just manipulating our reaction?

On the subject of faction, there are two factions. One group is instinctively anti, believing that, as soon as actual events are scripted and acted out, distortion and false reporting results. More positive pundits believe that, while the genre needs lawyers and ethicists on 24-hour call, it is sometimes the only way for journalists and dramatists to tackle subjects where the facts are hidden by spin or silence. I hold the second position - but with extreme reservations in this case.

Even by the standards of an always problematic form, the David Kelly story is a test for drama-documentary because the events depicted turn on definitions of exaggeration. [...] The problem is that employing a form of drama that's often accused of distortion to examine accusations of distortion may be like trying to test a flat surface with a broken spirit-level.

Last year's BBC film, *The Plot Against Harold Wilson*, was a reminder that the mixture of drama and documentary remains a controversial form, and that the dramatic imperative risks diluting the impartiality standard of the documentary. The drama should represent the truth as the writer/producer understands it to be: if, exceptionally, the drama is conjecture, it should be clearly signalled as being so. But the presence of documentary in this form entails a commitment to accuracy and fairness, which (as the Guidelines make clear¹) the dramatic elements should also observe.

Fictional drama often deals with controversial topics or situations. Radio and television soaps specialise in giving fictional clothing to contemporary social issues. *Spooks* does the same in the field of extra-parliamentary politics. Writers and producers need to challenge their own assumptions here, to reduce the risk of a specific (and therefore partial) approach to these social issues predominating.

The edition of *Judge John Deed* which dwelt on the safety of the MMR vaccine breached impartiality in the way it appeared to side with the argument that the MMR vaccine was dangerous to children – not least because the fictional manufacturers were portrayed as being prepared to commit murder in order to stifle medical dissent. The BBC's editorial complaints unit upheld the complaint against the programme, and ruled it should not be re-broadcast. This episode (in which the fictional dissenter was

¹ 'Fair Portrayal in Drama', section 5, p38

called Westwake, a presumably conscious echo of the real-life dissenter, Wakefield) gave undue and powerful credence to the argument that the MMR vaccine was unsafe. Impartiality does not mean that the BBC should accord lone dissenters equivalence with the full weight of scientific opinion. Equal scrutiny – yes. Equal weight – no.

Fictional drama without immediately topical issues may at first be thought to be exempt from any requirement to be impartial, so that the creative impulses of the individual writer or writing team are properly unconstrained. But, as with music, the range or breadth of view is important. Scripts, as well as actors, can become typecast.

Drama has the full canvas of human ideas and experience on which to paint. If there are blanks on this canvas, it may imply a partiality against those areas. This philosophy was captured admirably a decade ago by a former Managing Director of Television, Will Wyatt. At a meeting of the Drama Editorial Board, he challenged his staff by urging them to take seriously the impartiality clause in the new (1996) BBC Charter. ‘Some people perceive drama to be less in tune with our need for impartiality than other parts of the BBC. I haven’t come here to lay a heavy hand on you. But everybody pays for the BBC: unemployed miners pay. It’s the public’s money. We have to reflect this in our output. Yet there are whole areas of social life we don’t really touch: small businesses, for example.’¹ He pointed to a recent storyline in *EastEnders*, and went on: ‘it was so obvious that the evil guy had to be the small businessman. Surely we should resist these clichés? Why not have new kinds of representation: a non-cynical policeman, a nice politician, a non-sympathetic black man? We need a full range of true-to-life experience.’

Ten years on, these words of wisdom have not been fully absorbed, and they represent a continuing challenge across the range of drama. This was demonstrated most vividly in August 2006 by the almost audible intake of breath when Sharon Foster’s drama *Shoot the Messenger* was screened on BBC Two.

Shoot the Messenger, which won the Dennis Potter Screenwriting Award, was remarkable for the unblinking way it addressed uncomfortable issues and negative attitudes within the Afro-Caribbean community. There was some nervousness that the play would offend the black community – the issues and attitudes may be true to life, but should the BBC rehearse them before a largely non-black audience? In the event, the sky did not fall in: there was very little vocal complaint, but considerable surprise that Foster, as a black writer, and the BBC had dared to be so open. There had been louder protest when the polemical documentary series *The Trouble with Black Men* had been shown on BBC Three in 2004.

At the seminar, Sharon Foster reported conversations she had had with black people in Hackney, who said they were in two minds about the play. ‘And I’ve said, “If you knew only black people were going to see it, how would you feel then?” and they go, “Then I’d be fine.”’ She said the vast majority of people had felt they were able to exhale – they were relieved.

¹ Quoted in Georgina Born *Uncertain Vision* (Secker & Warburg 2004), p 332

The drama's executive producer, Hilary Salmon, was asked if she'd have been more worried if it had been written by a white person. 'Oh gosh, yeah of course. It's extremely unlikely that a white writer would have written that film with the insight that Sharon has.'

In an interview for the seminar, the writer Mark Ravenhill said that he and many connected with broadcast drama regarded most of the audience as not liberal enough. TV drama was a means to foster in them 'a more enlightened attitude towards gay people, disabled people, or whatever. We think of that as just a neutral, impartial thing to do – human rights, liberation for people, is the right and proper thing. So I think we forego the moral complexity of drama for fear that a viewer might empathise with somebody who is racist or homophobic.' He wondered why, for instance, the role of Pauline Fowler in *EastEnders* wasn't allowed a touch of racism, which would have been very much in character.

Claire Powell, who gives advice on drama in Editorial Policy, points out that blanks on the canvas may sometimes arise because writers do not feel qualified to deal with a particular section of society. The Muslim community is one such, and there are few Muslim writers to draw on. Will Wyatt in 1996 advocated using consultants from different perspectives to widen drama's range. But when a recent episode of *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* was developing a storyline about a marriage being arranged for a young Muslim man who was gay, the guidance from the Muslim academic advising the programme was that there was no such person as a gay Muslim. The episode went ahead.

Shoot the Messenger was a powerful demonstration of impartiality in drama. It defied stereotypes, it was morally complex, it said the previously unsayable. But this was not a drama driven by an impartiality-conscious committee. It resulted from the individual passion of a single writer, and shows how creativity and impartiality can be happy bedfellows, rather than natural enemies. It served also as a reminder that there are other aspects of contemporary life which political correctness has not permitted to be represented on television or radio. Channel 4's recent drama about a paedophile's release into the community, *Secret Life*, is another such reminder. There are still blanks on the drama canvas – and that is a creative opportunity.

Comedy in recent years has been painting in the blanks. There aren't many no-go areas. Some of the topical shows, such as *The News Quiz*, *Time Trumpet* and *Have I Got News for You?* rely heavily on humorists from a broadly iconoclastic position. This is the breeding-ground for much of the creative talent in topical comedy, which so long as it takes no prisoners of any political stripe is able to deflect accusations of bias. Drama too has often depended heavily on writers discontented with 'the establishment', 'society' or 'the system', and classics such as *The Boys from the Blackstuff* have resulted. But the BBC should be looking to widen the intellectual, social and political perspectives in this creative area.

Disapproval of political correctness was picked up in Sparkler's audience research. Although it was seen as indicative of 'a civilised, respectful society', some said it had gone too far, and itself caused bias. This was felt strongly by 'white working/middle class' respondents.

Don't be PC for the sake of it. It's gone barmy, hasn't it? Ridiculous.
Male, West Midlands

I think there's a limit to everything and there's common sense.
You can't say 'blackboard' any more. You've got to say 'chalk board'... I mean,
for f*'s sake. *Male, London***

The research project noted 'a worry that, when taken to extremes, political correctness is a restrictive mindset, preventing free expression and debate and diluting comedy and entertainment.' This approach was seen as 'a bias towards ethnic minorities, through positive discrimination, leaving the white majority feeling less like the majority. Interestingly, even some of the ethnic minority groups we spoke to felt that political correctness had gone too far and had in some cases overtaken common sense.' Some within these groups felt that political correctness was a fixation of the white middle classes.

The Sparkler respondents also said that the involvement of different communities in entertainment output, especially comedy, was important. They particularly approved of *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No 42*. 'This is in itself a form of impartiality, letting everyone take part.'

Children's programmes require particular care over impartiality. The Sparkler report makes clear that the audience has high expectations: children's output is right up with news and current affairs, consumer programmes and documentaries as a priority for impartiality. 'The world of children needs to be impartial', it says, 'to protect them'. Claire Fox, of the Institute of Ideas, expressed concern that many political and social campaigns see the child audience on television as a soft target. The Editorial Guidelines, designed to avoid the BBC becoming identified with particular campaigns (however worthwhile), are particularly important here.¹

Finally, a word about the **Weather**, which would not normally expect to take many casualties over impartiality. Yet the arrival of new computerised graphics on television in 2005 attracted immediate criticism from the audience for the new 3-D perspective which seemed to suggest that northern Scotland was on the periphery, while south-east England was in the forefront. This criticism (which matched the Sparkler observations about geographical bias) was quickly addressed: the adjustment to the tilt of the map involved, ironically, some distortion in the correct dimensions of the graphics' perspective. But the continuing practice of giving temperature forecasts (frost levels, for instance) for conurbations rather than for rural or small-town areas may suggest a presumption that the bulk of the audience lives in large cities, whereas the opposite is in fact the case.² This chimes in with the wider concern that an organisation which inevitably is predominantly metropolitan should be confident in its comprehension of life in smaller towns and the countryside.

¹ See Guiding Principle Seven, p54

² According to the 2001 Census, the aggregated population of Greater London, the UK's six metropolitan counties, and other cities and towns with a population of more than 200,000 amounts to some 23 million, out of a total population of almost 59 million.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE SEVEN

Impartiality is most obviously at risk in areas of sharp public controversy. But there is a less visible risk, demanding particular vigilance, when programmes purport to reflect a consensus for ‘the common good’, or become involved with campaigns.

When a subject provokes strong argument, the need for impartiality is obvious, even if the method of achieving it is difficult. When there seems to be consensus, impartiality may therefore seem redundant. Yet this is often where it is urgently needed – indeed, consensus can arguably pose a greater threat to impartiality than sharply-defined debate. As the Sparkler respondents said, impartiality should work towards the common good. But what appears to be the common good may not always work to the benefit of impartiality. Indeed, ‘the common good’ is frequently a sweet song from siren voices.

In Homer’s account, the singing of the Sirens was so heart-stoppingly seductive that Odysseus had to plug the ears of his crew as they sailed past, to prevent them being lured off course. He also had himself bound hand and foot to the mast so that, although he could hear the singing, he could do nothing about it. Equivalent measures of self-denial are sometimes required today to lance the allure of ‘common good’ consensus campaigns.

Campaigns always need special care. There are programmes about campaigns, programmes that run alongside campaigns, programmes that use campaigns, and programmes that are in league with campaigns. It is essential that commissioners and programme-makers work out which is which.

Investigations into campaigns will, by definition, entail an arm’s length relationship, and will not normally risk partiality towards a particular cause. But ‘softer’ observations of a campaign should be handled with caution, to avoid slipping into simple promotion. Programmes which, for reasons of topicality, run in parallel with a campaign require careful thought for the same reason. Those that use campaigns (in the sense of taking advantage of the expertise within them) should remember that campaigners have an agenda, and should not generally be regarded as objective observers of a situation. Charity workers in Iraq, for instance, are not objective (indeed, in such a contentious situation, it is hard to say who is – certainly not the military, or doctors and nurses). Content provided by campaigners (VNRs or audio recordings) may be attractive, particularly in cases where video or audio material is hard to come by. Such content may have wide currency on the internet, but it should not be used by the BBC without compelling reason – and then only with clear labelling.

Programmes that are in league with campaigns have no place on the BBC, because of the inherent loss of full editorial control. The audience has a clear sense of the demarcation lines here: according to Sparkler, ‘it was not seen as appropriate for the BBC to be actively campaigning on a given subject, whether that be for a better NHS or for better school dinners, for example, but it was perfectly appropriate to supply facts or follow an individual on those campaigns’.

In every case, programme-makers and commissioners need to be sure whether they are following a campaign as detached observers or helping a campaign with its message. They should take stock of their own emotional attitude towards the campaign in question.

In 2005, there was a particular example of a humanitarian campaign which was awareness-raising, rather than fund-raising. It collected signatures as a way of measuring that awareness – and it aimed to use this support to put pressure on politicians. It was called Make Poverty History, and it is instructive to examine the BBC's relationship with it in some detail, to see the problems that can arise even with (or particularly with) a campaign with such an admirable purpose. The BBC devised an approach to enable it to be involved creatively in a major national event – as it should be – while at the same time protecting the BBC's impartiality. The campaign culminated in the Live8 concerts, which in programme terms were a great success. Global, celebrity-driven mass entertainment in 'a good cause' is a bright new star in the political and broadcasting firmament, and the BBC is perhaps the organisation best equipped to be involved. Major issues of impartiality will always arise. But next time, whether it is 'Planet Relief' or 'Joining Hands for World Peace', the BBC will have the advantage of being able to refer back to its own experience in 2005.

The cause was brilliantly organised. It had an impressive array of celebrity sponsors, it was largely driven by talent already closely involved in the media, and it had bent the ear of two key men in Downing Street, who had already set up an Africa Commission to address the continent's problems. Its sophisticated use of the web gave it an extraordinary momentum. Its purpose – to eradicate world poverty – seemed utterly uncontroversial. Even when its global agenda was published – to get third world debt cancelled, to double international aid, to put a 'fair trade' system in place, to end corruption, and to put pressure on political leaders to achieve this – there was no political opposition to it in Britain. It seemed a classic case of a 'common good' campaign. But behind the scenes, the BBC's involvement with Make Poverty History in 2005 presented challenging dilemmas and was, for some, a difficult experience. Although the BBC was pleased with the outcome, there remain, even now, scars which have not fully healed.

2005 began with an edition of *The Vicar of Dibley* on BBC One on New Year's Day. Make Poverty History formally launched its campaign to coincide with this transmission.

The episode, 'Happy New Year', featured a storyline about Geraldine's keenness to 'make extreme poverty history for ever'. After her crusade has been mocked by her parishioners, she finally gathers them round her laptop to look at campaign material on the internet. The Make Poverty History website is clearly shown, and she then plays them a Make Poverty History video which runs full screen, without any other dialogue, for one minute 24 seconds. Having earlier handed round white armbands (a Make Poverty History campaign accessory), she ends the programme by turning round to find they have all put one on, in thrall to the video's message. And then, in place of the normal credits, the signature tune accompanies unsmiling portraits of each cast member wearing the armband – an unspoken appeal for audience support. Nowhere did the BBC acknowledge that the scriptwriter, Richard Curtis, was himself spearheading the Make Poverty History campaign. The implication was that the cause was universal and uncontroversial, whereas the Make Poverty History website made clear that it had contentious political goals. One view was that this was a laudable attempt to use the BBC's most popular comedy show to harness public interest for a worthwhile cause. Another (admittedly less widespread) was that the unsuspecting comedy audience had been ambushed.

The programme's ending had in fact been amended before transmission after a belated referral to Editorial Policy. (The same thing happened some months later with a related Richard Curtis drama for BBC One, *The Girl in the Café*.) The first draft had featured explicit promotional material for Make Poverty History, which was almost entirely removed in the effort to abide by the letter of the Editorial Guidelines. But it was too late to change the main thrust and outcome of this edition of the programme, which had been specifically commissioned by Controller BBC One without any consultation with Editorial Policy. The survival of a shot featuring the Make Poverty History website, and the script reference to 'making extreme poverty history for ever', arguably meant that the letter, as well as the spirit, of four Editorial Guidelines could have been breached:

We must not campaign, or allow ourselves to be used to campaign.¹

We must ensure that our output does not embrace the agenda of any particular campaign groups and that we treat groups objectively and do not favour one above another.²

We must retain our impartiality and independence when we cover charitable initiatives and report charity appeals³.

We should not appear to endorse a charity or charitable initiative in our dramas.⁴

This last guideline allows exceptions for 'BBC charitable initiatives such as Children in Need or Comic Relief: Red Nose Day'. Make Poverty History was not a BBC charitable initiative.

Richard Curtis argues that Make Poverty History was a movement, rather than a campaign, and that therefore the BBC should not have been so concerned about impartiality. He agrees that the political objectives listed on the Make Poverty History website complicated the negotiations with the BBC, but stresses that all the main political parties were in support of the movement – which he believed therefore made it uncontroversial. He believes the BBC regarded it as a 'non-political political issue'.

No impartiality complaint against *The Vicar of Dibley* was upheld, either in the Editorial Complaints Unit or in the Governors' complaints process – for the simple reason that not a single such complaint was received. Perhaps nobody wanted to play the role of Marie Antoinette. But the absence of complaint does not of itself mean there was no breach of impartiality. There are pressures on impartiality that can build from the seductive mixture of the determination and enthusiasm of well-connected talent, the cunning plans of high-profile and well-meaning lobbyists, and the sympathetic involvement of production departments.

It did not end there. As the year 2005 progressed, the BBC ran an Africa season, which coincided, uncomfortably for the BBC, with the report of the Government's Africa Commission, and with the gathering momentum towards the G8 summit at Gleneagles in

¹ Editorial Guidelines: Politics and Public Policy. Section 10, p94 (Appendix F)

² Editorial Guidelines: Social Action Programmes. Section 13, p126 (Appendix F)

³ Editorial Guidelines: Programmes about Charitable Initiatives. Section 13, p127 (Appendix F)

⁴ Editorial Guidelines: Programmes about Charitable Initiatives. Section 13, p127 (Appendix F)

July. One senior BBC executive said that impartiality in this Africa season was ‘as safe as a blood bank in the hands of Dracula’. Bob Geldof’s call for supporters of Make Poverty History to march on Edinburgh at the time of the summit was, for some in the BBC, a further cause of anxiety.

Make Poverty History had made a smart, emotive ‘commercial’, in which various celebrities clicked their fingers every three seconds to make the point that a child was dying of preventable poverty that often. It was a measure of the campaigners’ skill in handling the media and of the range of their contacts that they planned a ‘road block’ – in which the click video would be played on all British TV channels simultaneously. Not even the Queen manages that nowadays. But they almost did: of all broadcasters, only the BBC decided not to join the party. The Deputy Director-General decided that the film was a breach of the impartiality guidelines on campaigns, and, to the surprise of some of his colleagues, said it should not be shown on the BBC.

Several commercial broadcasters had asked Ofcom for advice over whether the click video was political and therefore ineligible, but Ofcom advised them to make their own judgment. Six months later, Ofcom declared: ‘We have reached the unavoidable conclusion that Make Poverty History is a body whose objects are wholly or mainly political. Make Poverty History is therefore prohibited from advertising on television or radio.’¹ The BBC had seemed exposed after reaching a similar judgment before the event, but Ofcom’s verdict vindicated it.

The BBC was understandably keen to carry the Live8 concert in Hyde Park – both because of the event’s high national profile, and because it had been Michael Buerk’s BBC news report twenty years before which had prompted Bob Geldof’s original Live Aid concert to raise money for victims of famine in Ethiopia. But the handling of it was to prove tricky.

The BBC’s coverage of Live8 was as extensive as its annual extravaganza for Children in Need. But, whereas that is a BBC charity, Live8 was neither a BBC event, nor fund-raising. It was a campaign to exert political pressure.

BBC Events, in charge of the outside broadcast, felt it raised considerable impartiality issues. The presenter, Jonathan Ross, was briefed about how to keep some distance between the BBC and the concert: he was to interview not only the celebrities taking part, but BBC correspondents such as George Alagiah and Andrew Marr, to give political and geographical perspective. Richard Curtis says he understood the BBC’s impartiality problems, although he felt that total evenhandedness was ‘very difficult on an occasion called Live8, which was aiming to influence the G8’.

After consulting widely, the executive producer, Nick Vaughan-Barratt, had decided against taking some of the campaign films being shown on the big screens in Hyde Park. George Entwistle from Current Affairs (who had oversight of the political content) previewed them before the event and as the live show unfolded. To avoid endorsing those with a political message,

¹ Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin no 43, September 2005

Vaughan-Barratt had the option to cut away from them to the presenter's pod above the Park – and he had conveyed that to the concert organisers.

His editorial plans dismayed Make Poverty History. They were challenged live on air, when Chris Martin of Coldplay introduced on stage 'probably the most important film you'll see today', and added: 'If the BBC turns it off, then it isn't doing its job properly'. It was a key moment, which dramatised the pressures the BBC was under. Anne Morrison, Vaughan-Barratt's head of department, was in the Park, and was taken aback by Martin's challenge. 'It was a churlish remark, considering we were taking the concert. He seemed to be rallying the crowd against the BBC.' But Peter Fincham, the new controller of BBC One, was also among the crowd. His instinctive reaction was that 'it was an extraordinary moment. I hoped the OB team would take the film.'

As its political message began to emerge, the OB director (as planned) cut away from it to Jonathan Ross, who then seemed to expect a return to the film. After a hiatus of several seconds, he made a remark about the hazards of live television and started another interview.

This editorial decision drew some sharp responses on the BBC's message boards. Some of the audience, at least, wanted the BBC to sign up to the campaign wholeheartedly.

The BBC have got what today's all about all wrong. The concert and all the celebs are only the vehicle for the real issue. The real issue is, like in Comic Relief, being highlighted in the short films in between the acts, that the BBC aren't showing. *Matt, Bittaford*

Why do you keep cutting away from the videos showing the real reason for today's event? Surely by cutting these out for mindless interviews misses the whole point of what today is about? *Steven & Sarah, Matlock*

The BBC had in fact made its own films. They were produced by the Comic Relief team in Bristol. 'They are good at putting emotive imagery together', says Anne Morrison. 'Richard Curtis may have been in the cutting rooms. But I was adamant that he shouldn't have sign-off. And it seemed hard for Live8 to cope with that.' In the end, they were not actually broadcast. 'We felt it wasn't right to cut away from the concert to take them.'

The big screens in the Park promoted the website where campaign supporters could sign a petition. The BBC had decided to refer viewers to its own Live8 portal, rather than to Live8's petition address. However, Jonathan Ross announced near the end that 26.5 million people had signed up with Live8, and then read out the campaign's website address. 'If you want to do that, feel free', he added – and then, with a stage wink: 'I'm not *asking* you to, because we're the BBC, and we're impartial!' Ian Hargreaves, a board member of Ofcom, was astonished by this as he watched it at home: 'without doubt', he said, 'it was the single most shocking breach of impartiality on the BBC in recent years'. The BBC clearly did not share that view, although it was for some of those involved an uncomfortable moment.

The coverage of Live8 was an extraordinary technical and logistical triumph on a day when the BBC was already committed to Wimbledon tennis. The Editorial Direction Group also concluded that overall the right editorial balance had been struck. But it is an indication of the range of opinion, even at a high level, that more than one member of the Group felt the OB team had been ‘too prissy’: impartiality concerns had been over-stated, and had got in the way of capturing the flavour of a big national event. They pointed to the Wembley concert which the BBC had covered in 1988, in support of the campaign to free Nelson Mandela – broadcast complete, without mediation in the supposed interest of impartiality.

The Africa issue was not over even then. At the end of the year, the BBC broadcast two retrospective films about Live8 – behind-the-scenes documentaries about the build-up to the concerts, and the tensions of the day itself.

The first, *It was Twenty Years Ago Today*, was a powerful and revealing film, notable for the expletive-laden vehemence of Bob Geldof himself. It began with the following script lines to introduce him:

The greatest musical line-up of all time...

A global audience of three billion people...

And, once again, one man making it happen.

The production was by the highly-respected independent, Brook Lapping. But Brook Lapping had become a subsidiary of Geldof's company, Ten Alps. There was no mention, before or during it, that the film had this Geldof connection.

The BBC relied, as it often does, on a staff commissioning editor to protect it from any conflict of interest. But this line of defence is dangerously thin. The films might have been made by a separate production company, or (as was offered) by the BBC itself. But neither would have had Brook Lapping's remarkable access, which made the films so memorable. Having decided to proceed, it might have been better (as the commissioning editor now agrees) to have acknowledged the Geldof connection verbally or visually during the film – probably more than once. Instead it was as if ‘what the audience's eyes haven't seen, their hearts won't grieve over’.

The Africa saga of 2005 points to the difficulties inherent in programming themes or seasons. They may often give shape to the schedules and highlight (quite legitimately) areas of public concern, but they are rarely without editorial hazard. There were potential pitfalls within the Africa season as it was, without the extra problems of its proximity to the Government's foreign policy, and the pressures from the Make Poverty History campaign.

Increasingly manipulative and media-savvy pressure groups are hungry for free airtime, and so are governments. They envy the BBC's trusted position in Britain, and naturally turn to it as the surest standard-bearer for their latest cause. Frustrated by public disenchantment, some politicians seem to believe that the BBC, in a public service role, can be harnessed to a government agenda, whether on matters of climate change or social behaviour. There have been four such approaches in recent months, and the BBC quite rightly rejected them. Once again, they were ‘common good’ subjects, about which little opposition had been articulated at Westminster. But there is often coherent opposition in the world beyond – which can

surface later in the political process. In any event, the BBC should be wary of political consensus: it may conceal intellectual laziness, and quite often turns out to be wrong.

Broadcasters are often keen to ensure that their themes or seasons have topicality, and so time them round fixed events in the political or social calendar. But such topicality brings editorial risk – not least when politicians or campaigners manufacture events in the calendar to fit round known dates of broadcast seasons. In this way, seasons risk being seen as either hand-in-glove or hijacked. They need careful handling at the earliest stages of planning. The Guidelines point out:

If our social action programmes or campaigns coincide with a government campaign or lobbying initiative it is important we retain an arm's length position.¹

Editorial Policy is best placed to advise on seasons – especially when they straddle different platforms and genres. It is not enough to reckon 'it will come out OK in the wash'.

Some creative talent is apprehensive that Editorial Policy could obstruct the creative process, and feels it is most appropriate and practical if its involvement is delayed until the drama has been shaped. Indeed, Richard Curtis, writer of both *The Vicar of Dibley* and *The Girl in the Café*, reckons that, if Editorial Policy had been involved at the commissioning stage, 'we wouldn't have got either one of them away. It is always easier to say No.'

Editorial Policy felt that Live8 was made more complicated by coming on top of the Africa Commission and the BBC's Africa season. The singing may not have been quite as beautiful as that of the Sirens. But put its consensual message together with breakneck decision-making on the hoof, cultural differences between programme departments, and the risk of broadcasters (not just the audience) being star-struck by high-octane celebrity, and impartiality was bound to be under severe strain.

Live8 was not a one-off. It was the future writ large. Next time it will be a spectacular about conservation, cruelty to children or climate change. The challenge for the BBC will be how to both be involved and maintain an appropriate distance. It would be unwise not to look back to Live8 to see how the BBC reached its intended destination, at least to its own satisfaction. Internally it was a bumpy ride, as is often the case in such complex, high-profile projects, but next time the BBC should know that much better where the bumps are.

Controller Editorial Policy at the time, Stephen Whittle, commented that this global music event with a political message was a good example of 'a contemporary challenge' to impartiality. 'Who could be against broadcasting this formidable array of musical talent, united in a desire to make poverty history?' And yet the BBC had a public service obligation 'to ensure that this was not a free ride for a political campaign'. Whittle told the Governors that 'committed and forceful talent used every means to try to stretch the rules, but overall we managed to hold the line'.

¹ Editorial Guidelines: Social Action Programmes. Section 13, p126 (Appendix F)

GUIDING PRINCIPLE EIGHT

Impartiality is often not easy. There is no template of wisdom which will eliminate fierce internal debate over difficult dilemmas. But the BBC's journalistic expertise is an invaluable resource for all departments to draw on.

Since arriving at the BBC as a newcomer nearly two years ago, Peter Fincham, Controller BBC One, has been intrigued by the amount of time some in senior management spend worrying about impartiality. During his career in the private sector, what he really wrestled with was the commercial side of programme-making. 'I always think that the BBC, freed of the need to agonise over the bottom line, therefore has a lot of spare capacity to agonise over other things. Does it agonise too much over impartiality? I don't think you can go so far as to say that, but I think also the BBC quite likes the agonising!'

The essential difference, of course, between the BBC and all other media outlets is that it is publicly funded through the licence fee, and publicly owned. The BBC has a unique relationship with the public, to all of whom in the end it is answerable, and that makes the agonising necessary.

If impartiality were easy, there would be no agony. But because it is hard to pin down precisely, its application will sometimes be hotly debated and disputed within the production process. Some of these arguments were explored in the *Hypothetical* at the September seminar, which tested the responses of a panel of experienced professionals to imagined professional dilemmas (though some were uncomfortably real) over different aspects of impartiality:

- 1 The BBC has been offered exclusive coverage of the Rolling Stones' huge and final farewell concert, which they are giving for charity. Would you take it?
- 2 The Asian woman presenter of the *Six O'clock News* arrives back from holiday wearing a hijab. What do you do?
- 3 Sacha Baron Cohen is Paul Merton's guest in *Room 101*, and says that, among the things he wants to get rid of are: kosher food, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bible. Is this a problem?
- 4 The Asian woman newsreader is getting married in a mountain village in Pakistan, and invites two senior BBC colleagues. When they arrive, they discover that one of the guests is likely to be Osama Bin Laden: what do they do?

In true *Hypothetical* tradition, all the dilemmas became more tortuous as they unfolded. Sometimes they overlapped with issues of taste and decency, with conflicts of interest, with potential clashes with the law. But they were all closely related to impartiality. Is one type of charity more acceptable than another? What happens when top celebrities seek to influence editorial control? Can clothing or jewellery seen on screen affect the perception of impartiality? Do the sensitivities of Muslims carry more weight in the BBC than those of Christians? Should BBC reporters put the interests of the state above those of journalism?¹

¹ The full transcript of the seminar is reproduced in Appendix D

It was shortly after the seminar that the issue of Muslim women's clothing became newsworthy, when Jack Straw made it known that, in his constituency surgery, he asked Muslim women wearing the veil to remove it during their discussion. There was also the tribunal ruling in the case of a teacher who had been suspended by Kirklees Council for refusing to remove her veil during maths and English lessons. So this particular *Hypothetical* dilemma was timely.

The importance of an impartiality yardstick in issues of religious offence was demonstrated by the Danish cartoons controversy. When cartoons of the prophet Muhammad were re-published in several European newspapers four months after their first appearance in Denmark in September 2005, BBC News initially ran a report which deliberately obscured the detail of the cartoons – a decision which was changed the following day. For the BBC, the controversy had arisen almost exactly a year after the broadcast of *Jerry Springer – the Opera*, which had attracted 47,000 complaints before transmission, many of them from practising Christians. The justification for its transmission, even though it risked causing religious offence, had been based on artistic grounds.

In the case of the cartoons, the BBC reckoned that, on grounds of impartiality alone, it should not favour one religion over another – and therefore that, in the interests of both free speech and a proper understanding of the controversy, the cartoons should be shown in context. There were three strands to this decision: on news programmes, the cartoons could be shown *in situ* in the relevant European newspapers, without close-ups; online, bbc.co.uk should list links to sites where the cartoons could be seen; and on discussion programmes (notably *Newsnight*) the cartoons could be shown and discussed in more detail, to provide proper context for the inflamed passions at home and abroad. The BBC, of course, was more vulnerable than the British press to outrage in the Islamic world, yet it was the press, without exception, which decided against publication of the cartoons in any form.

The *Hypothetical* panel consisted of six editorial and managerial figures at the BBC (Jana Bennett, Alan Yentob, Helen Boaden, Mark Damazer, Mary Fitzpatrick and Ben Rich), two broadcasters (Justin Webb from the BBC and Jon Snow from *Channel 4 News*), and an independent producer (formerly Head of Documentaries at the BBC), Alan Hayling. None of the participants had any advance notice of the dilemmas with which they would be confronted, and they all took part with good grace and good humour. The frankness and honesty of the discussion was engaging – and, for many in the audience, expanded the concept of impartiality.

I thought the *Hypothetical* was fantastic. It doesn't seem to me the dilemmas around impartiality now are the left and right ones. I fear that there is a loss of nerve around a new issue in politics which is religious offence which is making Enlightenment ideals dead and dusted. How are we going to inspire young Asian people to want to be part of a rational, enlightened society if we are spineless in the face of some of these challenges? We have to hold our nerve. Claire Fox, Institute of Ideas

If the BBC adopted a policy, informal or otherwise, whereby it excluded people who wanted to wear certain symbols from reading the news, that is likely to be illegal, and likely to be challenged. *Damian Tambini, LSE*

I'm just amazed there's a debate about it because as far as I'm concerned you don't wear a bikini wearing the news. You don't wear any kind of religious identification garb either. Anything that is going to interfere with the newsreader's relationship with the viewer and the authority of the institution in newsgathering has got to be wrong. It has nothing to do with religious intolerance. I'm amazed that those kinds of guideline don't exist already. *Steve Barnett, University of Westminster*

I was very struck by the way in which the BBC journalists were treating the Osama Bin Laden scoop. I was muttering to my neighbour: 'What's going on here? This is a fantastic story, the first time we're going to see this man who the world wants to see. And this is a story which we should be doing.' That's how the commercial news organisations in this country work: the news is the thing. We obviously deal with the fundamental ethical issues as they arise, but we don't worry about them beforehand quite so much as at the BBC. *Simon Bucks, Sky News*

Dilemmas were rehearsed more than resolved, but that was the point of the exercise. It became clear that there was no default position on impartiality at a senior editorial level. Each dilemma had to be argued through at speed (as often happens in real broadcasting life), and the emphases would vary according to the respondent's particular editorial background. There were different views about the rights of a Muslim woman presenter to wear the clothing she chose, about the level of caution over charities, and about the wisdom of talking to terrorists.

One senior BBC editorial figure commented afterwards that the thinking was 'surprisingly un-joined up' for dilemmas that were rooted in reality, even if the scenarios were fictitious. This argued for a more regular exploration of potential impartiality problems, to establish more clearly where the key principles lie. No one can play the infallibility card here. There will always be fierce debate. But because impartiality is tested daily in the crucibles of most of the BBC's journalists, it will be wise for other departments to draw on their experience when necessary.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE NINE

Impartiality can often be affected by the stance and experience of programme-makers, who need constantly to examine and challenge their own assumptions.

The Sparkler audience research found that many people felt under-represented on the BBC's output, 'whether these be Scots, old people, religious people, or black people'. Sometimes this was put down to an excess of political correctness – in the view of 'white people complaining at the number of non-white programmes or presenters' or 'non-white groups complaining of tokenism or stereotyping in dramas'. But also 'those in the North felt BBC output was all about the South, claiming "it's all about London", whilst those in Scotland felt it was all about the English, and those in the Midlands claiming it was all about the North and South of England'. According to the quantitative survey by Ipsos-MORI, more than half the population (57%) felt that the broadcasters 'often failed to reflect the views of people like themselves'.

It goes to show that, even within the compendium of original, ambitious and thoughtful programmes which the BBC produces year by year, you can't please all the people all the time. But the BBC has to be responsive to its audiences, and assess where they are coming from when they settle down to a programme. If they feel that BBC output does not frequently reflect their own lives, attitudes and concerns, they will lose faith in it – and the BBC's most precious asset, its audiences' trust, will start to drain away.

As part of their responsibility to licence-payers, programme-makers need to check regularly how their own stance and beliefs relate to theirs. With increasingly vocal and participatory audiences, it is not difficult to perceive their attitudes, however diverse they may be. It is sometimes harder for programme-makers to examine and challenge their own assumptions – and make the necessary adjustments in their creative or journalistic work.

In an interview for this Report, the Director-General, Mark Thompson, observed that impartiality involved input as much as output. It required an assessment not only of the content of programmes, but of what their makers had contributed to the process, in terms of open- and fair-mindedness – and of potential blind spots. 'Bias can be as much a matter of the questions you ask or the assumptions you bring to a particular topic as it can be of the final shape of the transmitted piece.'

In his recent philippic, Paul Dacre, Editor of the *Daily Mail*, accused the BBC of being, 'in every corpuscle of its corporate body, against the values of conservatism, with a small c, which I would argue just happen to be the values held by millions of Britons'.¹ He said that 'under the figleaf of impartiality' the BBC was 'imposing its own world view'. This is the latest of several accusations of a political conspiracy levelled by those on the Right – a notion which few who have worked at the BBC would recognise.

Dacre argued that the BBC was 'hostile to Britain's past and British values, America, Ulster Unionism, Euroscepticism, capitalism and big business, the countryside, Christianity, and family values. Conversely it is sympathetic to Labour, European federalism, the state and

¹ Cudlipp Lecture, 22 January 2007

state spending, mass immigration, minority rights, multiculturalism, alternative lifestyles, abortion and progressiveness in the education and the justice systems.’

But it is perfectly sustainable to compile different lists, and argue (as many do) that the BBC is hostile to organized labour, the traditional Left, republicanism, socialism, religious faith, multiculturalism and Islamism – and sympathetic to the monarchy, corporatism, globalization, the honours system, the police, glamour and celebrity, secularism, materialism and bourgeois values.

At the September seminar there was considerable debate about whether there was a set of shared assumptions among BBC programme-makers. Conspiracy theories did not have many takers. But there was wider support for the idea that some sort of liberal consensus existed.

‘It’s a bit like walking into a Sunday meeting of the Flat Earth Society’, said *The Daily Telegraph’s* Jeff Randall about his time as Business Editor of the BBC. ‘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.’

Janet Daley, also of *The Daily Telegraph*, said it was not a systematic political conspiracy to impose party political bias, but ‘something more insidious: a kind of corporate conformity – the uncritical acceptance of smug, consensual, received opinion accompanied by a journalistic credulousness’.

Georgina Born (Cambridge University), whose in-depth study of the BBC was published under the title *Uncertain Vision*, said it was ‘a highly self-critical organisation’ with ongoing editorial debates that she had witnessed. ‘On the other hand, it has an extraordinary defensiveness, extraordinary arrogance and a great deal of complacency.’ What worried her was that ‘banging on about enlightenment values can become a cloak for an intellectual monoculture within the BBC’.

Adam Boulton of Sky News said that he valued the central tradition of impartiality which derived from the BBC’s foundation, and was happy to operate within that tradition. ‘All news organisations have certain backgrounds. The BBC has a public service tradition, and therefore I would argue is more sympathetic to notions of public service, the NHS, than commercial organisations such as Sky. Fox News is no less professional and no more biased than, say, Channel 4 News in this country, which has a position on most of the news stories which you could predict in advance.’

Steve Barnett argued against the suggestion of a ‘liberal left consensus’ at the BBC. He saw this as ‘corrosive’ and a slur on the painstaking work of its journalists. He called for empirical evidence to show whether or not it existed: his own view was that it was propaganda from the Right, and he pointed to criminal justice policy, for instance, where many lawyers were ‘worried that the right wing are running the agenda’.

It would indeed be instructive to carry out empirical research into the level of intellectual freedom which programme-makers are afforded by the BBC – and by themselves. But, in the absence of that, this Report has relied on the assertions (in private and in public) by BBC staff at programme-making and executive level that what might be expected in a large organisation – a ‘group think’ – is not peculiarly absent at the BBC. Conspiracy theorists may quicken their own pulse with spectres of a BBC ‘thought police’ instructing programme-makers what to think: the reality is much more that individuals exercise on occasion a largely unconscious self-censorship out of a misguided attempt to be ‘correct’ in their thinking. Programme-makers are generally conscientious and self-critical, but they sometimes inhabit a shared space, a comfort zone, which if unacknowledged may cause problems for impartiality.

Last October, Richard Klein, Commissioning Editor for Documentaries, told the BBC’s Audience Festival that ‘by and large, people who work at the BBC think the same and it’s not the way the audience thinks. That’s not long-term sustainable.’

Stephen Whittle, former Controller Editorial Policy, pointed to what he called ‘the lack of intellectual curiosity’ in the BBC. ‘It’s monochrome in its thinking.’ He said it wasn’t diverse – in terms not just of colour, religion and culture, but of radical ideas about society. ‘It’s actually about not asking yourself hard enough questions – not actively getting out beyond the comfortable circle in the office in W1 or W12 into where the intellectual debate is happening.’

Justin Webb, the BBC’s Washington correspondent, said the BBC and other broadcasters failed to ask serious questions about why the USA is ‘as successful as it is, why the system it invented works. And, in the tone of what we say about America, we have a tendency to scorn and deride. We don’t give America any kind of moral weight in our broadcasts.’ When Webb was asked about ‘a casual anti-Americanism’, he said he consciously tried to redress it.

Andrew Marr, former Political Editor, said that the BBC 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.’ All this, he said, ‘creates an innate liberal bias inside the BBC’.

Michael Buerk said he believed the problem lay with an insufficiently diverse employment policy. ‘Most of the people working for the BBC are middle-class, well-educated, young metropolitan people.’ He said that, although the BBC had made great efforts to widen ethnic and gender diversity, ‘the actual intake of those people has narrowed quite appreciably in terms of age, social category, and education’.

Roger Mosey, Director of Sport, thought that ‘the BBC has in the past been too closed to a wide range of views and we’ve had too narrow an agenda. And I have some sympathies with what Janet Daley says generally about a liberal/pinko agenda at times.’

Mark Byford, Deputy Director-General, questioned the notion that there was a soft liberal consensus at the BBC. He said the BBC’s different journalistic

outlets were driven by the same values: ‘truth, accuracy, impartiality and independence’. He took heart from the Sparkler research which showed the audience as being ‘really intelligent about impartiality. They didn’t define it as balance. They didn’t define it as left/right. Although they said it was complex, they also said it was about open-mindedness to ideas.’

If a comfort zone exists – a liberal view of the world which enables people in the institution to feel comfortable with each other – it risks stifling originality, and could lead to a Roneo mentality which would be inimical to the breadth of view required by impartiality. At present much of the criticism of the BBC has been driven by people on the Right, but those with longer memories will recall how frustrated those on the Left were in the past by what they perceived as a default centrism. Instead of being immediately defensive about these criticisms, which may of course sometimes be misplaced, programme-makers should contemplate the fresh perspectives they offer. Spot checks on their own shared assumptions – or, in some cases, blind spots – can be revealing, and the tenth bottle on the alchemist’s shelf, Self-Awareness, is an essential element of impartiality. But it is of course of no value to correct one sort of consensus by simply replacing it with another – or, in Dorothy Byrne’s phrase, to rush *en masse* from one side of the ship to the other. The ship will still list. Programme-makers should spread their collective weight to keep it on an even keel.

The BBC has come late to several important stories in recent years – particularly awkward when they turn out to have been catalysts for cultural turning-points. It missed the early stages of monetarism, Euroscepticism, and recent immigration – all three, as it happens, ‘off limits’ in terms of a liberal-minded comfort zone. But there have been other blind spots.

At the seminar, David Jordan cited capital punishment. ‘I challenge anybody in here to mention the last time that the *Today* programme did capital punishment and didn’t sound as if they were completely against it in principle – or, even in a non British/American context, had somebody on who was in favour of it.’

Roger Mosey believes that after the Good Friday agreement, the BBC misconstrued what was happening in Northern Ireland. It was the victim of a centripetal pull towards the ‘moderate’ centre of politics there, which led to a failure to empathise with supporters of the Democratic Unionist Party.

One news and current affairs producer mentioned an instance where he had proposed a *Newsnight* investigation into the extent to which abortion in Britain was available, in effect, on demand. His argument was that there was a conspiracy of silence about this: although it had not been the intention of the legislation, most people in the field knew this was what was actually happening. But he was accused of being ‘anti-abortion’, and a perfectly reasonable – indeed fascinating – programme idea was not pursued.

Helen Boaden said that the BBC’s institutional attitudes were sometimes confused with its editorial policy. As an employer, the BBC was ‘passionately committed to diversity beyond what the law requires’, and this led to muddled thinking. ‘I’ve literally had conversations with my journalists, who think we can’t say nasty things about black people even if they’re true, “because we’re committed to diversity, aren’t we?”’

She quoted an example from some years ago when she was editor of *File on Four*. A reporter working on a programme about victimisation at Feltham young offenders' institution rang her up. 'He said, "Helen, we've found out that most of the victims of the bullying are white, and most of the bullies are black. Can we say it?" And I said, "If you've got the evidence and it's fairly weighted, of course you can say it". It was terribly telling, that. Because of the confusion with the institution's aspirations, that had filtered into the journalism.' The programme went on to win a gold Sony Radio Award.

Roger Mosey, in his time as Head of Television News, had a similar experience, in the case of a film about census returns in parts of east London, showing that ethnic communities had become the majority. The film included interviews with council officials, members of the Asian community, and one white resident – who pronounced himself happy with his neighbourhood. Questioned as to whether this voxpop was really representative of the white community, the reporter replied with pride: 'Oh no, we had to work really hard to find him!'

A recent edition of *Newswatch*¹ (itself a valuable exercise in self-criticism and responsiveness to viewers) highlighted audience concerns that, whenever schools were featured on the News, there was a disproportionate number of pupils from ethnic minorities – and mentioned one report (where racial or cultural issues were not the story) in which four out of four featured pupils were from ethnic minorities. A week later, *Breakfast* led on a story that Ofcom was banning junk food advertising on children's programmes: once again the majority of the children shown (watching television) in this report were from ethnic minorities, and yet there was no geographical significance in the story.² Was this intended to convey a message that children from ethnic minorities were more susceptible to such advertising, or that this was a representative picture of the ethnic spread of the viewing public?

Those who live and work in the metropolis may be surprised to be reminded that the 2001 Census recorded the UK population as a whole as being 92.1% white, with 7.9% coming from ethnic minority backgrounds – that is, one in twelve – although the same percentages would not necessarily apply to children of school age. This is a difficult area, because if the actual proportions are observed, the presence of one non-white person in ten or twelve could appear to be tokenism. But producers and reporters should not feel duty-bound to include non-white representatives in every report or programme in a way which may be disproportionate, and should remember the dangers of relying too heavily on inner cities as the prism of their reporting.

The BBC's policy of ethnic diversity in employment was perhaps a factor in what Mosey describes as its 'fairly overt support' for multiculturalism. It irked the Business Editor at the time, Jeff Randall, though he concedes the policy has now changed.

¹ BBC News 24, 16 February 2007

² There were four different shots. In two the ratio was 50:50, in the other two, the balance was 75:25 in favour of children from ethnic minorities.

When I was there, this was not up for grabs. Multiculturalism was ‘a good thing’. The BBC supported it. Don’t take my word for it because, when I complained to the BBC about our coverage of asylum-seekers, this is what I got back from a very senior BBC news executive: ‘Jeff, the BBC internally is not neutral about multiculturalism. It believes in it, and it promotes diversity. Let’s face up to that.’ Now, does that sound like impartiality to you?

The fact that a diverse range of people such as Trevor Phillips, the Chief Rabbi and the Bishop of Rochester have now criticised multiculturalism should not mean a Gadarene rush to the opposite extreme. But it should shake the issue out of the comfort zone.

Dorothy Byrne’s robust view of a similar syndrome at Channel 4 should stiffen the sinews at the BBC.

We have to be prepared to fight our own programme-makers who don’t want to say what doesn’t fit within the liberal consensus. I commissioned a programme in which Carol Thatcher would say that her mother would be remembered as a peacemaker and Tony Blair would be remembered as a warmonger. (Her argument for this was that her mother had been involved in the Berlin Wall coming down and Tony Blair appeared to have been part of invading several different countries.) Several people involved during this production became very unhappy about the thesis – because they happened not to agree with it. And I had to say, ‘It doesn’t matter that you don’t agree with it, because, you know what, nobody cares what you think! I’m interested in what Carol Thatcher thinks and within this programme she will meet people who don’t agree with that view, and that’s fine. You don’t matter.’

As he left the BBC in 2005 after several years as Controller Editorial Policy, Stephen Whittle noted that ‘the ecology of journalism is shifting’. With the movement towards ‘views-papers’, and the growing success of Fox News in America and the Arabic language channels ‘which place as much emphasis on stance as on substance’, he said that a version of ‘global warming’ was underway, ‘in which the traditional division between fact and opinion is becoming increasingly blurred’. It was no surprise, he said, that there was ‘a temptation for BBC people to follow suit’. This was being resisted. For the most part, he went on, BBC staff followed the Guidelines on impartiality, and there were few cases of obvious bias. But the problem lay deeper, with ignorance of subject areas such as rural life, religion or Europe ‘undermining the BBC’s approach’ – an ignorance that the College of Journalism would be aiming to correct.

‘More difficult to address’, Whittle continued, ‘are the unchallenged assumptions people bring to their editorial judgments. For example, many of those in front line positions in newsrooms across the country have not had the journalistic experience of covering a successful and well-articulated right-of-centre alternative. The default mode has tended towards the progressive centre because it has dominated the political agenda for so long.’ He said the challenge was cultural. ‘It is about breaking the mould. We need editors in every genre to take their role as gatekeepers seriously and challenge their own and their teams’ assumptions. We need to get them out of the straitjacket and strive for distinctive rather than derivative BBC journalism and other programmes.’

That remains the challenge in 2007. The gravitational pull towards the centre may not simply be the result of a dominating political culture – after all, the domination of the Right for ten years in the 1980s never resulted in Thatcherism becoming the default mode within the BBC – but there can never be too much fresh, lateral or distinctive thinking, and it is up to programme editors and series producers to stimulate it. The audience – and programme-makers themselves – can only benefit.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE TEN

Impartiality requires the BBC to examine its own institutional values, and to assess the effect they have on its audiences.

It is not only individual content-providers who need to examine their own independence of mind and breadth of vision. The BBC itself carries baggage which may colour the audience's perception of its impartiality.

As a broadcaster and programme-maker, the BBC cannot avoid having both character and attitude. It is not an impersonal purveyor of anything and everything. It makes choices, it nurtures creative talent, it has artistic and editorial standards. It also has a clear role in British national life, initially represented by Montague Rendall's sonorous phrase on the BBC's coat of arms in 1926: 'Nation shall speak peace unto Nation'. Its most recent expression is in the 2006 Royal Charter, which proclaims that the BBC exists 'to serve the public interest'. The Charter goes on to state, for the first time in the BBC's 84-year-history, that its main object is to promote a set of six 'public purposes':

- **sustaining citizenship and civil society;**
- **promoting education and learning;**
- **stimulating creativity and cultural excellence;**
- **representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities;**
- **bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK;**
- **in promoting its other purposes, helping to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services and, in addition, taking a leading role in the switchover to digital television.¹**

All members of BBC staff carry on their ID card a mission statement, which sets out the BBC's values:

- **Trust is the foundation of the BBC: we are independent, impartial and honest;**
- **Audiences are at the heart of everything we do;**
- **We take pride in delivering quality and value for money;**
- **Creativity is the lifeblood of our organization;**
- **We respect each other and celebrate our diversity so that everyone can give their best;**
- **We are one BBC: great things happen when we work together.**

A further expression of BBC values, in particular its editorial values and its attitude to religious belief, is set out at various points in the Editorial Guidelines.

These purposes and values are hard to quarrel over. It is in their application to particular circumstances that problems start to creep in. What assumptions does the BBC institutionally make about the common ground? Are those assumptions consciously made or are they automatic? Should it make any at all? And what do they reveal about the BBC to its audiences, in terms of what it implicitly supports or believes in?

¹ The Public Purposes are amplified in the Purpose Remits set out in the Framework Agreement. They are reproduced here at Appendix E

Take, for instance, religion. The Guidelines state that the BBC respects the fundamental human right to exercise freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including an individual's freedom to practise a religion. But is the BBC itself Christian? Whether it is or not, is it seen as that?

We have come quite some distance since Reith's sermonising after the General Strike. Radio 4 no longer carries *The Epilogue*, and *Thought for the Day* has been substantially diversified in recent years. But *Songs of Praise*, *Sunday Worship* and *Choral Evensong* take their place in the schedules almost as of right. This Report is not arguing that this is mistaken, but is drawing attention to the assumption of normality that this regular scheduling implies. When, outside religious programming, mention (admittedly rare) is made of Jesus Christ, Holy Communion, the Crucifixion or the Resurrection, belief is not assumed, but explanation is not normally given. These essential elements of the Christian faith are presumed to be shared knowledge among the audience, whether or not as individuals they are believers. Is this still a reasonable assumption in a society which sustains less and less religious education, and what does that convey to different parts of the audience? How does it affect the audience's perception of the BBC's impartiality? If this approach were changed, and explanations were always added (as they are with most other religions), what message would that convey instead – that Christianity was no longer part of the cultural mainstream?

In the case of democracy, the BBC's first public purpose implies a support for the British political system. But is it axiomatic that democracy is 'a good thing' in all continents and cultures? Does the BBC make that assumption? In the days of the Cold War, it was taken as read that democracy as practised in America and western Europe was superior to communism as practised in the USSR and eastern Europe: pronouncements by communist states were not taken at face value or given equivalent weight. Would the same happen today? Attempts to export democracy during the Cold War were assumed to be a good thing, whereas such exports today – particularly in the Middle East – are more contentious.

Mention was made earlier of the risk of the BBC's employment policies bleeding across into editorial judgments – in terms of equality and diversity. But the Sparkler research points to a feeling that the BBC is perceived at times as politically correct, which may distort audiences' perceptions of BBC impartiality in this area. When the then Director-General, Greg Dyke, said the BBC was 'hideously white', what messages did that convey to licence-payers, let alone the staff? When the *Question Time* audience in the ultra-white city of Lincoln was leavened with black and Asian people bussed in from afar, was this a legitimate attempt to skew the audience to fit national proportions – in which case what was the point of going to Lincoln? Or was it an unacknowledged distortion of the true character of Lincoln? Are such decisions made deliberately – or automatically, as part of the BBC's own progressive culture?

Does the BBC's institutional support for equal rights for women and gay people spill over unthinkingly into the way it makes programmes, and what are the BBC's assumptions when addressing inequalities of gender and sexuality in societies and cultures of different persuasion? Should the BBC represent 'British values', or should it espouse cultural relativism? The BBC's own Outreach website, addressing corporate responsibility and partnerships, may, in some cases, add to the confusion here. The 2006 report highlights progress towards targets for the representation of disabled people and ethnic minorities, but

listing plot-lines and on-screen characters in a box-ticking way may reinforce the impression of political correctness that the Sparkler respondents formed. Should Outreach not also tally up other categories that, in the estimation of some people, are under-represented – for instance, women of late middle age (on television), working-class white men, and the very elderly?

In its assumptions about moral standards, should the BBC be guided only by what is legal or illegal? Or does it have moral values? Does it implicitly disapprove of pornography, of heavy drinking, of unhealthy eating, of urban 4x4s? If it should not be ‘hideously white’, should it be ‘beautifully green’? The BBC often used to say it did not take attitudes – except that it was always opposed to racism. Is it still? Should it be? Why does it need to have a view at all, rather than merely observe and report the actions and views of others?

There are many more questions here than answers. The point is that the BBC, in its corporate behaviour and programming policy, conveys messages to its audiences, sometimes quite unconsciously, and it is important to acknowledge and allow for that in the quest for the holy grail of impartiality.

When people refer to a programme being ‘typically BBC’ in terms of its quality, depth or rigour, a blush of pride may legitimately spring to the programme-maker’s cheeks. But if the ‘typically BBC’ remark refers to the programme’s attitude or line, the blush should probably be one of embarrassment. If a ‘BBC attitude’ is discernible, it suggests either that the BBC’s range is too narrow, or that perceptions of its institutional stance have got in the way.

The BBC’s own understanding of its role and place in society – and the extent to which it endorses certain values and attitudes, or stands aloof – is a critical part of the impartiality equation. When this institutional understanding drifts apart from that of its audiences, it can at first create perplexity, and then irritation.

The understanding is important because it defines the BBC’s world view. Now that there are other major players in the international broadcast news market with different perspectives, it will become increasingly apparent that the BBC’s approach to life is not the only one.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE ELEVEN

Impartiality is a process, about which the BBC should be honest and transparent with its audience: this should permit greater boldness in its programming decisions. But impartiality can never be fully achieved to everyone's satisfaction: the BBC should not be defensive about this but ready to acknowledge and correct significant breaches as and when they occur.

When it was made clear that the impartiality seminar held in London last September was going to be streamed live on the Governors' website, there was a certain amount of sucking of teeth – and not just from within the BBC. Did we really expect top executives and broadcasters to wrestle with real dilemmas (even if wearing hypothetical clothes) in public? Outsiders in the hall itself could be relied on to play the game by 'Chatham House rules': surely we didn't need to let the public eavesdrop? The seminar was criticised afterwards by one or two members of the then Board of Management for, in effect, washing the BBC's dirty linen in public. One said it had been 'extremely damaging' to the BBC.

That is very much 'old thinking'. It is true that impartiality always used to be discussed behind closed doors at Broadcasting House and Television Centre – indeed, after this seminar, some of the press referred to it as a 'secret summit', even though they had been reminded that it had been webcast. The reality is that you can't close the doors any more.

Information has proliferated so fast in our broadband culture that audiences know almost as much about the decision-making process as the broadcasters. They no longer have to stay 'sitting comfortably' until the meal is presented on a plate: they have seen the ingredients in the shops, compared the prices and the quality, watched the preparation, and helped stir the pot. Come to that, they probably saw the animals reared, and the vegetables planted – they may even have grown them themselves. They still want producers to do the work, but they understand more and more of the process, and are adept at second-guessing decisions. Six years ago, *Unreported World* revolutionised foreign reporting by enabling the audience to observe the process as well as the results. It now stands as a metaphor for what is happening in broadcasting more generally.

In the past, many editorial decisions could be taken in the comfort of knowing that audiences could judge programmes only by what they had heard or seen on air. They would never have known which bits of Saddam Hussein's execution video had been left out. Today, they know only too well. So paternalism will no longer wash: broadcasters have to be ready to explain their decisions. And trust works both ways: if the BBC expects to retain the audience's trust, it must also trust the audience by 'letting daylight in on magic'.

A lot of this debate is actually about the role of the institution – a fear that maybe the BBC won't be infallible and that we'll show our fallibility. I think that if we had more courage about being transparent in the decision-making process, inviting the audience into the debate, a lot of these ills would be cured. *David Schlesinger, Reuters*

Impartiality itself is a process. There is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but the search never ends. As a result of the agonising, the BBC acquits itself with great distinction most of the time. It should always be ready to share its decision-making with the audience:

this should be part of its contract with the licence-payer. If it tries to close the doors, the information will leak out sooner or later, and the BBC will end up looking defensive or worse. But if it keeps the doors open, it will help the audience to understand how impartiality works, and trust will grow. The editors' weblogs on the BBC News website have begun that process. Every now and then, openness entails a risk of unfavourable publicity – but that is a daily part of the heat in the BBC kitchen. The greater prize is the maintenance of the audience's trust.

That trust is the BBC's most precious resource. While it remains publicly owned and funded, it is essential. Whatever slings and arrows of outrageous fortune have winged their way to the BBC, the basic level of trust has endured. That should give the BBC courage not to be defensive about every hostile headline in the press – but also to be ready to acknowledge and correct breaches of impartiality whenever they arise, as they undoubtedly will. No broadcaster with 408,415 hours of output a year on television and radio and a website with a reach of thirteen and a half million people can escape that. The BBC talks bravely about being ready to apologise when necessary, but in reality it sometimes finds apology difficult. Yet, after a misjudged edition of *Question Time* the day after 9/11, a crisp admission of error from the Director-General quickly doused the flames of controversy.

The audience, as measured by the Ipsos-MORI survey, is sympathetic to the scale of the challenge. Almost half of them (44%) reckoned 'it is impossible to be impartial – there is no such thing', although a substantial minority (a third) disagreed with this. 84% said it was 'difficult to achieve, but broadcasters must try very hard to do so'. And – the sting in the tail – 61% agreed that 'broadcasters may think they give a fair and informed view, but a lot of the time they don't'.

Impartiality in today's world must be a transparent process. To that end, a transcript of the entire September seminar is published with this Report. (Appendix D)

GUIDING PRINCIPLE TWELVE

Impartiality is required of everyone involved in output. It applies as much to the most junior researcher as it does to the Director-General. But editors and executive producers must give a strong lead to their teams. They must ensure that the impartiality process begins at the conception of a programme and lasts throughout production: if left until the approval stage, it is usually too late.

On rare occasions, it is possible to spot the impartiality state of mind actually clicking in. It happened earlier this year after the announcement of an increase in the BBC licence fee, when the BBC's new business editor, Robert Peston, inadvertently spoke of the BBC as 'we'. Without so much as a blink, he corrected himself, and carried on with his report by referring to 'the BBC' as a third party.

The best way to ensure the impartiality of BBC programmes is indeed to develop it as a state of mind among BBC staff and freelancers. Full awareness of its challenges and opportunities is essential.

Most impartiality issues arise early in production, sometimes when the programme idea is first mooted. That is the time to fill blanks on the canvas, or broaden the range of views. When impartiality presents dilemmas, recognition of them is the essential first step – and this may require training and awareness-raising in different genres and platforms.

Just as the best programme lawyers want to help a show retain its edge, and to find a way that is legally secure to do that, so Editorial Policy should be an enabling department, helping producers to achieve their goals by ensuring the content is editorially and ethically secure. It should not be seen as a police unit – although that role is sometimes forced on it because content-providers have delayed consulting it for too long. Editorial Policy represents the accumulated wisdom of the BBC in this area.

Editors, executive producers and commissioning editors are (to extend the words of the Neil Report) 'the day-to-day custodians of the BBC's values'. They of course take ultimate responsibility for the impartiality of their output, and there will always be occasions where programmes need slight adjustment in the final stages of post-production. But if the adjustment at that stage is more than slight, the experience is likely to be painful, even bloody. Early consultation and discussion will resolve most difficulties.

There was a time, not so long ago, when broadcasting was regarded as an ephemeral medium. Programmes came and went in the ether – and producers who were stuck with a dodgy sound edit, or a weak piece of visual continuity, had the comfort of knowing that their awkward moment was transient. Blink (or cough), and you'd miss it. Now the intention for all output is that it should be freely available on demand. That makes the BBC's impartiality requirement all the more stringent. Just as powerful search engines prevent personal indiscretions or embarrassments sliding into oblivion, so the age of the podcast is ensuring that every impartiality decision taken in the heat of the daily broadcasting battle is preserved in the present tense – for ever.

7. CONCLUSIONS

BBC Trust

Under present arrangements, the Trust will continue to

- monitor impartiality in the BBC's output;
- look to the Executive Board for the delivery of impartiality, according to the provisions in the Royal Charter and its accompanying Framework Agreement;
- require a code of practice for the application of impartiality – currently embodied in the BBC Editorial Guidelines.

In view of the changing broadcasting environment and the challenges this poses to the traditional understanding of impartiality, as well as the broader understanding of impartiality outlined herein, this Report makes four recommendations to the Trust.

- 1. The Trust should continue the Board of Governors' practice of conducting regular, subject-based impartiality reviews. These should be extended to cover relevant non-factual output and themed seasons.**
- 2. The Trust should require a regular review of impartiality from the Executive Board.**
- 3. The Trust's Editorial Standards Committee should satisfy itself that it has appropriate independent advice on impartiality issues across the range of the BBC's output.**
- 4. As the principle of impartiality applies across all the BBC's output, both domestic and international, the Trust should consider the implications of this Report for its international services, and if necessary, commission further work.**

BBC Executive Board

On the basis of this Report's findings on the practical application of impartiality, new structures are not needed. But there should be a better use of the mechanisms already in place, and a better awareness in the whole of the content-providing community – not just in news and current affairs – of the full scope of impartiality in the modern, digital age, and of the opportunities and pitfalls that beckon.

Editorial Policy is available for advice and guidance, to enable programme-makers to achieve their goals without running into compliance problems. It should be more formally involved at the commissioning stage. The BBC's recently-established College of Journalism is an invaluable resource which should be extended to a wider range of BBC content-providers.

A. Transparency with the audience

The days of blind trust in Auntie are over. In today's world, the BBC has to keep on earning trust from increasingly savvy audiences. They understand the idea of impartiality: it matters to them – particularly on the BBC – and they regard the BBC as 'generally impartial'. It is essential to keep track of audience attitudes in a fast-changing broadcasting environment and a more complex and diverse society.

(i) BBC executives and programme editors should be as open and transparent as possible with audiences about impartiality issues, dilemmas and decisions.

(ii) The BBC should regularly commission detailed audience research on impartiality.

(iii) The BBC should resist the commissioning of programmes from production companies which have a commercial or other separate interest in the subject matter of those programmes. If conflicts of interest arise within the BBC or with independent production companies, the BBC should handle them transparently.

B. Impartiality across the range of output

Impartiality affects every content genre and every platform in the BBC, not just news and current affairs on radio and television. The principles are the same, but the application of them will vary. The audience clearly understands this very well. All departments, whether factual or non-factual, need to examine where there are gaps in their coverage, and why.

(i) Every department or commissioning editor which is involved in topical or factual content (in whole or in part) must consider the issue of impartiality in all relevant output.

(ii) Journalism Board should have appropriate liaison with every department dealing in factual output.

(iii) At the next opportunity, the Editorial Guidelines should amplify the understanding of impartiality in different genres.

C. Addressing impartiality dilemmas early

Problems sometimes arise with impartiality because it is addressed too casually or too late. It is now formally included in the compliance report submitted at the time of delivery of the programme (whether produced internally or externally, or acquired). While this should continue, it is by then too late for all but the most serious breaches to be corrected. It should rather be pondered at the earliest stages of commissioning. Because of Editorial Policy's central role in this area, it is formally represented through Controller Editorial Policy on the Journalism Board. That should now be extended to other relevant editorial forums.

(i) Impartiality should be specifically addressed in writing at the earliest stage of the compliance process, before production has begun. This should be required of all

programmes, whether commissioned internally or externally, and both the producer and the executive producer should be formally involved.

(ii) All departments (factual or non-factual) and commissioning editors should consult Editorial Policy about any sensitive or contentious output idea before it is commissioned.

(iii) Independent productions falling within the purview of the Journalism Board should be encouraged – and, where appropriate, required – to consult Editorial Policy before production begins.

(iv) In view of the essential role of Editorial Policy in the impartiality process, Controller Editorial Policy should sit on all relevant editorial output forums.

D. Themed seasons

Seasons, particularly those which cross platforms and genres, have the potential to cause major challenges – on account of both their sheer volume, and the lack of clear editorial accountability at a senior production level. Particular difficulty arises when seasons consist of a mixture of entertainment and factual output.

(i) When commissioners or schedulers are planning themed seasons across different departments or platforms, one senior editorial figure should be given overall responsibility for the season's content.

(ii) The senior editorial figure should be required to consult Editorial Policy at an early stage, and to report on impartiality issues that have arisen or are expected to arise.

E. Campaigns

It can sometimes be a short step between themed seasons and campaigns. But (with the exception of Children in Need and Comic Relief) the BBC has to be wary of campaigns. While it is easy to see that the BBC should not be involved with one-sided campaigns (against nuclear power, for instance, or to keep a local school open), it becomes harder when lobbyists' campaigns are humanitarian, or seem to be of universal appeal. But the guidelines are both right and clear about this. The BBC is not here to provide a free ride for any campaign, however worthwhile. That is precisely what many lobbyists would like, and design their campaigns to achieve. The BBC must always maintain both independence and perspective.

(i) The BBC should draw the attention of staff in all programme areas to its guidelines on campaigns. The Editorial Guidelines should make a direct correlation between sections on campaigns and on impartiality.

(ii) Programmes about external campaigns or campaigners should consult Editorial Policy.

F. User generated Content (UGC)

The BBC has rightly required checks to be made about the provenance of UGC – both in terms of its veracity and the methods by which it has been secured. Now that material from ‘citizen journalists’ can be transmitted live, it is important to maintain these checks – but also to ensure that they are not so cumbersome as to prevent important news images reaching the screen at the earliest possible moment. Properly handled, UGC is an important new resource for news programmes. UGC which is not directly offered to the BBC but is circulating on the web poses additional problems. It may be impossible to identify (let alone speak to) the source, and such material should be handled with caution.

(i) In this fast-developing new area of content, programme-makers should follow the online guidance from Editorial Policy – in particular about verification of the material.

(ii) As the guidance makes clear, all UGC in News should be clearly identified both visually and verbally, and the original source of the material made clear, if relevant. UGC should not be claimed implicitly or explicitly as BBC material.

(iii) Before UGC is repeated in other programmes outside news and current affairs, a check should be made to ensure questions have not arisen subsequently about its validity.

(iv) The Editorial Guidelines need regular updating in this new area. As UGC becomes much more common, the current ban on its live transmission is likely to need review.

G. Personal view against professional judgment

Impartiality does not require absolute neutrality: the BBC should broadcast professional, evidence-based judgments by those qualified to make them: specialist correspondents, senior documentary-makers, expert presenters. The audience clearly values this. But the airing of personal opinion on public issues by BBC personnel is incompatible with impartiality. This is a challenging distinction, particularly at a time when the press, other television and radio channels, and the variety of new media on the internet all crave personal opinion. But it is vital that the BBC maintains it.

(i) The policy of appointing editor-correspondents in particular areas of expertise in News should be extended when the opportunity arises.

(ii) The guidelines on outside commitments for BBC personnel, designed to protect their and the BBC’s impartiality, require strict observance and regular review.

H. Breadth of view

Factual programming should not normally be built simply round a ‘for’ and ‘against’ proposition. Opinion is more complex and subtle than that. All rational shades of opinion should be covered, though not necessarily in equal proportions. Maverick or minority views

should not necessarily be given equivalent weight with the prevailing consensus, but it is not the role of the BBC to close down debate. In both factual and non-factual output, there may be blanks on the creative canvas – sometimes caused by political correctness, sometimes by shared assumptions within the programme-making community, which result in the exclusion of uncongenial views or ideas. Filling in these blanks is a refreshing creative opportunity, and an essential element of impartiality.

- (i) Editors and executive producers in all departments should challenge their production teams to widen their perspectives, and fill such gaps as may exist in the breadth of their coverage.**
- (ii) The BBC should allow more scope for polemical and authored programming on controversial issues, provided that the authorship is clearly identified, and that it is, over a period, counterbalanced by different opinions of equivalent weight.**
- (iii) Within the full range of drama, entertainment, and all varieties of factual, audiences should be able to recognise their own experiences, opinions and aspirations.**
- (iv) Independent research should be commissioned to explore the perception of programme-makers of the BBC's editorial values and the breadth of creative and intellectual freedom they are afforded.**
- (v) Programme-makers should be alert to 'political correctness' and consider whether it inhibits a proper breadth of view in output.**

J. Training

Impartiality needs to be brought to the forefront of programme-making ideas and decisions. It should be part of every content-provider's professional equipment. Because of the regular turnover in programme staff, this cannot be taken for granted, and training initiatives are required to ensure that people working for the BBC are fully aware of the opportunities and responsibilities involved. The valuable work of both Editorial Policy and the College of Journalism in this area is ripe for extension.

- (i) The College of Journalism should extend its range to include all those involved in providing factual content, whether or not they work in factual departments. It should also consider how best to involve freelancers and independent producers working for the BBC.**
- (ii) A rolling programme of impartiality seminars, led by the College of Journalism, should be held in various BBC premises for those at the sharp end of output. Editorial Policy and the College of Journalism should extend their pro-active role over impartiality, by arranging an annual seminar for senior executives and editors, related to recent or forthcoming dilemmas.**