

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

June 2017

In Search of Unbiased Reporting in Light of Brexit, Trump and Other Reporting Challenges in the UK and US

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on Media, Politics and Public Policy

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“Monogamy is actually more obtainable than news objectivity”¹

Digital disruption is changing everything about the news except its professional core. Reporters use the same norms and values now as 100 years ago: objectivity, fairness and balance for the institutional media in the USA, accuracy and impartiality for the BBC.

How did these principles emerge? What are their limitations? Do they still help reporters deliver “the best obtainable version of the truth” in a world of growing disinformation?²

Introduction

The BBC’s commitment to impartiality caused an uproar in 2009 when Nick Griffin, widely reviled as leader of the far right British National Party, was invited to appear on its flagship political debate show, *Question Time*.

Politicians and faith leaders weighed in against the BBC, newspapers accused it of a publicity stunt, and the Secretary of State for Wales tried unsuccessfully to get the show pulled. The BBC stood firm. Its director general and editor in chief, Mark Thompson, said the BBC wasn’t in the business of censoring unpalatable views.

On the day of his appearance, hundreds of chanting demonstrators gathered outside the BBC’s Television Centre. Despite months of security planning, a group rushed the gates, burst in and scattered through the building. An outraged young woman slid past me on her back as a bemused policeman pulled her by the legs out of the building. When she saw me she pointed furiously and bellowed “Shame on you. Shame on you.”

Instead I felt proud that the BBC had lived up to its commitment to impartiality, being open to a very wide range of opinion, testing that opinion rigorously, not taking sides in matters of public controversy, however emotionally charged, and trusting the audience to make up its own mind. BBC journalism had reflected the world as it is, not as some wish it to be.

As it happened, there were almost no complaints after the airing of the program, which doubled the usual audience in size. Private polling by the BBC showed that the general public thought the BBC was right to invite Nick Griffin and had handled the debate responsibly.

In America, my enthusiasm for the BBC’s core value of impartiality usually drew a polite blank stare. You rarely hear the word used of American journalism and if it is, it is usually as a synonym for “objectivity” and said with a raised eyebrow. The objective journalist, corrupting an original idea of Walter Lippmann, is viewed with skepticism. Why on earth should journalists have unique powers of objectivity? And if ‘impartiality’ is equated with ‘neutrality’ as in, not taking sides, the eyebrow goes

a little higher. In the US, neutrality is often regarded as ‘value free,’ which is deeply uncomfortable for the Fourth Estate, protected by the First Amendment to independently hold power to account.

Similar values and norms of journalism—America’s “objectivity, fairness and balance” and the BBC’s “impartiality and accuracy” aspire to do the same job of delivering verified, balanced, fair, truthful and trusted reporting to their audiences. They have much in common and yet are subtly different. And they differ sharply in their levels of public confidence. The BBC is widely trusted by a broad demographic³ while the US news media have their lowest trust ratings in history.⁴

Liberal democracies run on the shared belief that accurate, independent journalism and open debate help citizens decide their collective future without resorting to violence. As *The Washington Post* romantically puts it: “Democracy Dies in Darkness.”⁵

Today that belief, like liberal democracy itself, is under pressure from a range of economic, political and social forces.⁶ James Harding, director of BBC News and Current Affairs, has warned that propaganda never went away and is on the rise as authoritarian regimes use rolling TV channels and social media newsfeeds to destabilize traditional journalism. He’s described their news as a disorienting “twisted mix” of fact, half fact, decontextualized fact and fiction, in the service of a self-interested agenda.⁷ After studying how people shared 1.25 million stories online during the 2016 presidential campaign, researchers at Harvard and MIT observed how the same “twisted mix” of disinformation, anchored around the “alt-right” site Breitbart, “turned the right wing media system into an internally coherent, relatively insulated knowledge community, reinforcing the shared world view of readers and shielding them from journalism that challenged it.”⁸

Social media fit perfectly with our natural tendency to pay more attention to things we already agree with, a trait which social scientists have documented over many years.⁹ Constitutional-law professor Cass R. Sunstein warned in 2001 of the risk to democracy posed by “any situation in which thousands or perhaps millions or even tens of millions of people are mainly listening to louder echoes of their own voices.”¹⁰

Traditional institutional media starts in a different place, summed up in a tweet from the BBC’s former political editor, Nick Robinson, after pro-Brexit MPs tried to bully the BBC about its Brexit coverage: “Do not adjust your set. Normal service from the BBC means you will hear people you disagree with saying things you don’t like (that’s our job).”¹¹

Although the BBC and America’s institutional media share similar journalistic values, they exist in very different media ecologies. In the UK, partisan divisions are embodied by a robust, popular newspaper system with a lot of political clout; broadcasters are constitutionally impartial and the largest of them, the BBC, is both trusted and widely consumed.¹² Seventy-seven percent of UK adults use BBC News

every week.¹³ During the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, the BBC was the most used source of information for voters.¹⁴

The BBC is funded by its license fee, a hypothecated tax or compulsory subscription linked to ownership of a TV set or use of the BBC iplayer. Government sets the level of the fee, but the BBC collects and spends it independently. The BBC receives over three and a half billion pounds a year from the license fee, vastly more than the public funding received by American public broadcasting outlets like NPR, which depend on listener donations and funds from wealthy foundations and individuals. NPR receives a mere 2 percent of its budget from the federal government.¹⁵ Like the BBC, it is committed to traditional journalistic values, and does not take sides in politics or matters of public controversy.¹⁶

In the US, network television news aspires to the same traditional values but often in a highly diluted form, while cable TV picks and chooses. The American press, rather than its broadcasting, keeps alive the purest form of independent, objective journalism and tries to uphold traditional values and norms.

Against a background of political and economic turbulence, and journalism's own "permanent revolution," this essay surveys some of the pressures which shaped news values and norms on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁷ In America, they emerged in the early 1900s to separate independent reporting from its roots in political propaganda.¹⁸ Around the same time, the BBC's founder, John Reith, argued for an impartial, independent broadcaster to keep the new mass medium of radio free from commercial or political exploitation.¹⁹

The values have lasted a century, and even those who get the majority of their news through social media continue to consume journalism which follows the old professional practices. Online, American audiences mix what they read on hyper-partisan sites with what they read on the sites of traditional media.²⁰

The norms and values of journalism are hard to pin down, difficult to deliver and may look anachronistic in a digital age. But in an age of growing disinformation, they still matter.

Words and Meanings

Journalistic truth is not a pure, philosophical truth. It is a practical, functional, "as much as is knowable" truth underpinned by processes which enforce "the discipline of verification."²¹ This is more than just collecting the facts. Facts distort the knowable truth if selected or presented without important context. As the Hutchins Commission pointed out back in 1947, "it is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact."²²

Norms are understood by social scientists to be moral prescriptions for social behavior.²³ Objectivity, fairness and balance are values, or “moral prescriptions,” within American institutional journalism. They are also tools of the trade.

Similarly, impartiality, along with accuracy, is a professional practice for BBC journalists. As methods of work, BBC impartiality and American objectivity are the same. Reporters ideally find, sift and present facts and evidence without bias.

Walter Lippmann, co-founder of the *New Republic* and a hugely influential twentieth-century figure, advocated the idea of objectivity because journalists, like everyone else, were prone to their own biases.²⁴ He wanted a *method* of objective investigation to help them over their prejudices.²⁵ Fairness and balance, the idea of getting a range of perspectives on an issue, were added to the professional norms to help reporters explain, as well as report, a complicated world.

As working methods, BBC impartiality and accuracy have the small word “due” prefixing them, which is vitally important in terms of their implementation. “Due impartiality” means that the range of perspectives and opinions in a story does not have to be covered in equal proportion across the output. Editors and reporters can use their judgment and expertise to weigh significance. Equally, “due accuracy” does not mean just getting the facts right, though that is a good start. It means that journalists need to weigh the facts and arguments and use their editorial judgment to decide significance.²⁶ The BBC updated its definitions of impartiality in 2007 and clarified that ‘balance’ “can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on the center ground.”²⁷

There’s no singular definition of ‘objectivity’ in American journalism or ‘impartiality’ for the BBC, though the qualities of both in news include detachment, nonpartisanship, an emphasis on the collection and use of facts, and a sense of balance in the coverage.²⁸

Some news professionals don’t believe pure objectivity is ever possible. One American media executive tartly observed, “Monogamy is actually more obtainable than news objectivity.”²⁹ But journalists argue that society expects a practical objectivity from roles like judges, juries, scientists and auditors—so objective journalism is not unthinkable.³⁰

However, there is a striking difference between the American and BBC approaches. American objective journalism sits within a partisan context. American newspapers have a strong tradition of opinion journalism and editorially they often take sides in public debate, endorsing presidential candidates, for example.³¹ Objectivity, fairness and balance within a partisan editorial context are not the same as BBC impartiality.

The BBC would never endorse a politician and doesn’t comment or take sides in any matters of public controversy except on freedom of expression. Impartiality is its core institutional and constitutional value. The BBC’s commitment to impartiality is

written into its Royal Charter which also guarantees the BBC's existence. Despite its constitutional framework, the BBC's critics don't believe it is impartial and frequently accuse it of hidden bias. During the Brexit referendum in 2016, for example, Remain campaigners condemned it for offering false balance between the two sides and thus implicitly favoring the Leave campaign,³² which the BBC denied.³³

The BBC's philosophy is to let the quality of its journalism answer its critics. It relies on first hand, in-depth, evidence-based reporting to get to the knowable truth and make its own argument. It claims to present a wide diversity of opinion and voices on air and has a strong tradition of adversarial interviewing.

Nor does impartiality mean that the BBC upholds no values. It supports democracy and free speech within the law. It is against criminal activity while recognizing that different countries and cultures have vastly different ideas about right and wrong. At its simplest, the BBC believes that the evidence it brings its audiences is more useful to them than the BBC having an opinion.

In both countries, the independence of journalism is proudly proclaimed and sacrosanct. In the US, it's protected by the First Amendment which also protects nearly unlimited freedom of speech. For the BBC, its Royal Charter enshrines its independence.

The Influence of Money

News journalism carries a complicated set of meanings in a liberal democracy. On the one hand it is a commodity, driven by its core economics as much as by its editorial mission. John Reith, the BBC's founder and first manager wanted to protect his fledgling company from "force and money—unfortunately the only two unfailing powers," and successfully argued for public funding.³⁴

In the US, money is an "unfailing power." As a former senior media executive observed, "For broadcast networks, it's purely advertising so it's all about ratings, which is why you see a lot of sensationalism on local television news. With internet sites, with very rare exceptions, it's purely advertising which is why clickbait is so important. The more people click, the more money."³⁵

On the other hand, journalism is also the lifeblood of liberal democracies. In his book *Informing the News*, Harvard Kennedy School's Thomas Patterson points out the contradiction: "The press is unusual in being a private business with a public trust. It is obligated by its constitutionally protected position to serve the public interest but driven by its business needs to serve itself."³⁶

At its most egregious, this tension leads to nakedly self-interested journalism on the part of media companies who have a direct stake in the story. A study on a multi-billion dollar "give away" of broadcasting spectrum in the mid-1990s, for example,

demonstrated that the reporting of the story was significantly shaped by the media owners' direct economic interests. In any other context, a government "give away" would have received scrutiny from broadcast networks. In this case, the networks stood to be the beneficiaries and barely touched upon the issue in their newscasts.³⁷

Though a so-called church/state divide separates editorial from advertising, most US journalists are acutely aware of the economic challenges facing their institution. Economics particularly influenced the direction of US journalism after the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Until then, the Federal Communications Commission (and before that the Federal Radio Commission) had issued broadcasting licenses on the basis of public interest. Radio and TV stations had to devote some of their programming to controversial issues of public importance and within those programs, ensure a range of views and the right to reply for anyone personally attacked. If a broadcaster carried a conservative talk show in prime time, it was obligated to also carry a liberal talk show in an equivalent time slot.³⁸

Once cable TV arrived and FM radio expanded, the airwaves and opinionated talk radio took off. Within a few years, Rush Limbaugh, the conservative radio host, had a weekly audience of 20 million. His success encouraged Rupert Murdoch to launch Fox News in 1996 and within five years, it had outstripped the other cable channels who responded with talk shows of their own.³⁹ Network television responded to extra competition with infotainment formats.

Cable channels like Fox and CNN, with dual revenue streams of subscription and advertising, are incentivized to keep their loyal subscribers happy but can change their fortunes overnight through advertising. In 2016, CNN got huge ratings from its saturation coverage of Donald Trump's rallies during the primaries.⁴⁰

Traditional US news outlets also feel the weight of internet and social media competitors for advertising dollars. When Google's software enabled advertisers to target customers with precision and at scale, it not only became the biggest media company in the world, it undercut advertising as the core revenue driver for journalism.⁴¹ Google, Facebook, Verizon, Twitter and Yahoo took more than 65 percent of all digital advertising revenues in 2015.⁴² Sixty-two percent of the American population now gets news from social media,⁴³ with Facebook being the dominant source, gathering data from users at every point of contact with the internet and targeting advertising to them directly via their news feeds.⁴⁴

The social platforms have always denied they play an editorial role in news distribution, though the "fake news" revelations of the presidential election forced a slight shift in their position.⁴⁵ After interviewing a wide range of media leaders, Emily Bell and Taylor Owen of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism concluded the platforms were incentivizing certain types of editorial content. Their newsfeed algorithms decide what news consumers get, with no reference to the editors and publishers who gather and report that news.⁴⁶ James Montgomery runs digital development at BBC News and regards Facebook's newsfeed algorithm with growing concern. He sees it cutting against the very essence of BBC impartiality by

precluding diversity of voice and opinion and undermining fairness and balance.⁴⁷ Bell and Owen argue that the structure and economics of social platforms fundamentally undermine traditional news. “Journalism with high civic value...is discriminated against by a system that favors scale and shareability.”⁴⁸

The Influence of Politics

Bell and Owen recommend that one of the few ways to protect well-funded, independent, civic journalism in the US would be a powerful market intervention, like the creation of the BBC in 1922.⁴⁹ It’s wishful thinking.

The decision to abolish the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 showed unswerving faith in the marketplace to deliver all the information a healthy liberal American democracy needs. By contrast, the BBC was invented by John Reith because he feared exploitation of mass media by commercial and political interests against the broader “public interest.”

The BBC lost its monopoly position in 1955, but its underlying principles remain: Inform, Educate and Entertain. Those principles are underpinned by high quality and universality, offering something of value to everyone because everyone pays for it.⁵⁰

Unlike some European public service broadcasters, the BBC refuses advertising, sponsorship or product placement on its UK services to protect itself from commercial pressure.

In 2017, the license fee was 147 pounds, about \$183 per year, paid by everyone with a TV or using the BBC’s iplayer service. The universal nature of the license fee, reinforced by law, made the BBC’s impartiality an imperative. John Reith, writing in 1924, accepted the BBC would be a neutral force. “It will not be easy to persuade the public of an absolute impartiality, but impartiality is essential.”⁵¹

He was right about it not being easy. Within two years, Reith was battling to defend the BBC’s impartiality during the General Strike of 1926.⁵² As printers stopped work and newspaper production ground to a halt, Winston Churchill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, wanted to commandeer the BBC and get his hands on radio, the most powerful mass medium in the land. More temperate ministers preferred to leave the BBC with some measure of “semi independence.”⁵³ Many listeners who supported the strikers felt the BBC had sided with the British establishment.⁵⁴

Over many years, BBC journalists have covered the BBC as if it were a separate institution. They apply Reith’s ethos of neutrality and impartiality to the BBC itself in investigative programs like *Betting the Farm* in 2004 or *Jimmy Savile—What the BBC Knew* in 2012. It is hard to imagine commercial media being so publicly self-critical.

But when reporters have taken on subjects that are highly sensitive for government, like war or terrorism, BBC journalism has often found itself in conflict with its own institution. In 1986, for example, Conservative Party Chairman Norman Tebbit complained that the BBC's reporting of US bombing raids on Tripoli and Benghazi, following a terrorist attack on a German nightclub used by American servicemen, was "riddled with inaccuracy, innuendo and imbalance" and called for a review of managerial and editorial standards. The press cheered him on. The row was one in a succession of bitter disputes between the Corporation and the government over BBC journalism, some of which had been seriously flawed.⁵⁵ This time the BBC's new chairman, Marmaduke Hussey, issued a point-by-point rebuttal and said the BBC would not be intimidated.⁵⁶ In private however, he was keen to restore relations with government. In a series of moves described by BBC Historian Jean Seaton as "meticulously planned like a coup," the chairman agreed with the government minister responsible for the BBC that the director general, Alasdair Milne, should be sacked. "[T]he BBC consumed its own."⁵⁷ Milne was fired and relations with government began to thaw.

The BBC is an intensely political institution inextricably woven into the political and cultural fabric of UK life. Richard Sambrook, former director of BBC News and the BBC's Global Division, is Professor of Journalism and Director of the Centre for Journalism at Cardiff University. He has argued that the BBC's institutional need to protect itself will, on rare occasions, trump its commitment to impartial, independent journalism.⁵⁸

Sambrook was in charge of BBC News when reporter Andrew Gilligan went onto Radio 4's *Today* program at 6:07 am on May 29, 2003, and accused Tony Blair's government of having deliberately "sexed up" the joint intelligence committee report on Saddam Hussein's chemical and biological weapons capability to make the case for war stronger.⁵⁹

The government fiercely denied the claim. The prolonged fallout from the row included the shocking suicide of the ministry of defense weapons expert, Dr. David Kelly, the story's source, and eventually led to the resignation of both BBC Chairman Gavyn Davies, and Editor in Chief and Director General Greg Dyke.⁶⁰

Sambrook accepts that not all the BBC's journalism on the so-called "dodgy dossier" was well handled, but he draws a bigger lesson from the clash with the Blair government: "[I]f the BBC says to the government that fundamentally there is rot at the core here, that's a big problem. And the BBC has to be very, very careful, because it is in the end dependent on a political deal to exist."⁶¹

And the political deal can be brutal. In July 2015 David Cameron's Conservative government suddenly ordered the BBC to pay for the free license fees which are given as a welfare provision in the UK to people over 75 years of age. The policy effectively reduced the BBC's income by 800 million pounds a year by the next decade.⁶² The BBC negotiated some mitigation but a former director general, John Birt, accused ministers of behaving "like medieval kings" in making an independent

broadcaster responsible for welfare provision. He said the BBC's Charter was too weak to protect its independence.⁶³

Looking back on his own experience, Sambrook believes there are rare but real limits on the independence of the BBC and the kinds of stories it can tackle. He argues, for example, that the BBC could not have challenged governments in the way that *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* did in June 2013, when they took on the documents leaked by the US intelligence officer, Edward Snowden. "I find it uncomfortable to say that, but it's the truth," said Sambrook. "So what does that tell you about the BBC? It tells you that in the end, there is a limit to its independence—some would call that public accountability. It is a wonderful news organization. It does fantastic journalism every day. But there is a limit to it. And I think in the end that was part of a miscalculation in the Kelly story. We thought we were genuinely independent. And we weren't"⁶⁴

The license fee gives BBC journalism unique freedoms. It liberates editors to innovate and make their own journalistic choices in line with the BBC's editorial mission. It gives the BBC muscle in the news marketplace without the normal commercial pressures. It enables it to take risks on big targets even when that makes the organization highly unpopular, like the investigation into corruption at FIFA in 2010 when England was bidding for the World Cup. What the license fee can't do is protect BBC journalism from the politics of the BBC's institutional survival.

How the Pressure of the News Cycle Drives against the “Knowable Truth” of a Story

News is not a mirror held up to society.⁶⁵ It's a selection of events told in story form with an emphasis on the new, the dramatic, the unusual and increasingly, the live and immediate. Time, money and the medium have always shaped the message. Today, convergence means that news cycles are getting faster while work flows are more complex and stretching. Everyone is caught up in “the exhilarating search after the Now” as James Reston of *The New York Times* once described it.⁶⁶

The speed of the news cycle is like a force of gravity, constantly pulling against the journalist's professional disciplines and values. It's similar to the tension between “fast thinking” and “slow thinking” originated by the Nobel Prize winner, Daniel Kahneman, in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Fast thinking is speedy, instinctual and emotional; slow thinking is deliberative, logical and takes effort. Fast thinking explains spontaneous stereotyping and our tendency to replace a hard question with an easier one.⁶⁷ It might also explain why daily news is often much better at the “who, what and where” of reporting than the “why.”

The packaging of news reinforces “fast thinking.” Daily news is short and quick: newspapers edit their words to the essence of a few facts and quotes; television news tends to see things in shards, foreshortening context; radio news, with some

public broadcasting exceptions, is brief headlines; digital content is sliced, diced and atomized for clicking and sharing.

A hundred years ago Walter Lippmann wanted journalists to focus objectively on the evidence, in effect, to use their capacity for “slow thinking” to get to the knowable truth. John Reith’s commitment to impartiality was his way of placing reason and fact at the heart of BBC journalism. But it’s hard for reporters to hang on to rational, slow thinking in the intensity of a huge, rolling story with a lot at stake for the nation. The 2016 US presidential contest illustrates just how hard.

“An epic fail” was how *The Washington Post*’s Margaret Sullivan described reporters’ blindness to the rise of Donald Trump.”⁶⁸ Despite saturating him with coverage, they couldn’t believe that someone “who spouted misogyny, racism and anti-Semitism” could become president in the America they thought they knew.

American journalists may not have liked Donald Trump but they found him irresistible.⁶⁹ He was good copy and from the start, he played directly to the media’s love of controversy. Fairness and balance flew out of the window as he grabbed a huge share of the Republican coverage in the primaries. CNN took the initiative, live streaming almost all of his rallies, usually without lengthy comment or challenge. His Republican rivals barely got a look in. Trump served up conflict, outrage, headlines and great ratings and the rest of the media piled in.

He owned the campaign’s sound bites. “Lock her up” and “make America great again” were heard far more often in the news than “he’s unqualified” and “stronger together.”⁷⁰ From the moment Trump announced his candidacy until he received his party’s presidential nomination, he received nearly twice the news coverage of his nearest rival. In the general election period, he received 15 percent more coverage than Hillary Clinton.⁷¹

That coverage was literally worth a fortune. The media measurement firm, mediaQuant, has calculated that over the course of the campaign, Donald Trump received the equivalent of \$5.8 billion in free media advertising from news organizations, nearly \$3 billion more than Clinton.⁷²

Not all of Trump’s coverage in the general election was positive. Quite the reverse. Tonally it was relentlessly negative, the most negative coverage since 2000 when the media decided Al Gore was too sly and George W. Bush too stupid to deserve the presidency.⁷³ After analyzing the election content of the major daily newspapers and TV nightly news shows, Thomas Patterson says journalists fell into the trap of false balance by treating Clinton’s flaws and failings as if they were no different than Trump’s.⁷⁴ The writer Joan Didion once described this kind of fairness and balance as “a scrupulous passivity, an agreement to cover the story not as it is occurring but as it is presented.”⁷⁵

Margaret Sullivan blamed journalists’ prejudices for blinding them to what was sitting in front of their eyes. With their college educations—92 percent of American

journalists have a degree—their liberal attitudes and their urban lifestyles, they were victims of confirmation bias which, just like audiences on social media, is reinforced by checking their favorite election sites.⁷⁶

If Sullivan is right, it would make Walter Lippmann wince. A century after he saw reporters' prejudices blinding them to the truth of the Russian Revolution, the 2016 presidential election suggests it is as hard as ever to report the world as it is, not as reporters might like it to be. During a highly emotional election, many failed to apply their old fashioned professional norms of impartiality, fairness and balance. They couldn't get past their own biases to recognize the nature and importance of Trump's swing voters. They covered the disenchantment and disenfranchisement of those voters but they didn't treat them as a large and determined force. "They just didn't get it."⁷⁷

For BBC journalists, elections are more straightforward. Broadcast and electoral law ban UK broadcasters from endorsing candidates or giving any of them disproportionate airtime so there is no leeway for exuberant coverage. That doesn't mean that BBC reporters are preternaturally immune to the negative pressures of the frenetic news cycle, especially in the firefight of a big story. The tendency to deliver heat without light, facts without context and sometimes false balance is not absent in the BBC.

John Birt, director general between 1982 and 2000, implicitly recognized this when he radically repositioned BBC journalism towards depth and analysis. With Peter Jay from the *London Times*, he had published a series of articles in the mid-1970's arguing that television journalism was biased not against a party or a position but "against understanding," in offering facts and stories with little sense of how they connected or why they mattered.⁷⁸ His "mission to explain" in journalism prioritized the analytical and evidential over the dramatic and sensational. He disdained random crime stories popping up in news bulletins and disliked what he regarded as a BBC culture of oversold investigations and self-aggrandizing adversarial interviewing. He forced the rest of the BBC to make 30 percent savings which he largely redirected into news, investing in specialist newsgathering, the BBC website and a rolling TV news service. His critics complained that BBC news had become patronizing, didactic and dull under his regime. But audiences went up for his newly launched, analytical *Nine o'clock News* on BBC One.⁷⁹ Today, his influence is evident in the BBC's well-funded newsgathering operation, a largely broadsheet news agenda, and the analytical expertise of specialist BBC editors who imbue news programs with authority and flavor. Their dominant presence may be one reason why BBC news is widely trusted in the UK.

Did Birtism succeed in permanently establishing analytical, evidential thinking in a fast, live news environment? The evidence is mixed. The BBC Trust, until 2017 the BBC's regulator on accuracy and impartiality, commissioned ten reviews into the BBC's impartiality.⁸⁰ None found the BBC guilty of bias but most criticized it for failing to give audiences enough contextual information to be useful. The latest review in 2016, *Making Sense of Statistics*, praised the BBC for "giving careful

thought” to the way statistics were presented but said journalists must do more: “The BBC has a responsibility to help audiences make sense of the statistical evidence in an impartial way. This involves being willing, more than at present, to weigh, interpret and explain the statistical evidence and, when appropriate, challenge and correct when it is misused.”⁸¹

Almost every impartiality review concluded with a similar thought: the BBC’s journalism was impartial but there was still a “bias against understanding” in parts of its output.

Conclusion

Money and politics have shaped the norms of journalism in America and at the BBC and will continue to do so. America’s deep-rooted faith in markets to deliver good outcomes is being tested by the dominance of social media platforms which are destroying the old media economics. However, it’s almost impossible to imagine any kind of regulatory intervention to protect civic journalism if it can’t survive on its own.

Money also shapes the BBC’s journalism. The universality of the license fee keeps the BBC honest by pressuring it to serve all audiences in the UK, not just the elites. It gives BBC News enviable editorial and investment freedom. But the license fee also makes the BBC intensely political. Every director general trying to negotiate a new license fee understands that politics matter. While I have never seen that affect day-to-day editorial decisions, the long-term future of the organization depends on skilled negotiations with whoever is in government at the time. It’s an uncomfortable place for an independent news organization.

Reporters are trained in traditional journalistic norms and values, but in the heat of battle can’t always sustain them. When they do, the results are exceptional. *The Washington Post*’s David Fahrenthold won a Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for his in-depth reporting into how Donald Trump manipulated his charities. Fahrenthold has explained how he started his investigations acutely aware of his own potential for bias.⁸² He worked against it by actively seeking out evidence which might have knocked down his own hunches about the story. It was a classic piece of objective, or impartial, methodology rooted in open mindedness. Walter Lippmann would have been proud.

In a different environment, the BBC’s Robert Peston broke a series of award-winning, major news scoops on the financial crisis in 2008, which also combined impartiality, expert analysis and authoritative judgment while keeping on top of a running story.⁸³ Bankers attacked him for bias but he had triple-sourced every scoop from different perspectives and was able to easily discredit claims he had been manipulated. His journalism combined the best of impartial, rational “slow thinking” in a very fast environment.

Both Farenthold and Peston are brilliant, tenacious and highly skilled but they also worked in well-resourced, established institutions whose brands are founded in their commitment to traditional journalistic values. Other reporters may have their will but may not have the same time and resources. The journalistic norms and values are of limited value if your newsroom is being downsized and you have to rely on press releases and political puff pieces rather than original reporting. Generously funded newsgathering on every platform is an essential building block for serious journalism and it is under huge pressure.

And it's an open question about how far traditional journalism, based on the old norms, can counter the "twisted mix" of state or hyper-partisan propaganda that is on the rise.⁸⁴ At the BBC, they're launching a new initiative, Slow News, which offers audiences ramped-up expertise, data journalism, social media fact-checking and short, highly personalized "slice of life" films. In an echo of John Birt's "mission to explain," James Harding, director of news, told his staff: "Slow means taking our time to research and understand what's happening; not taking up our audience's time in telling it."⁸⁵ Slow News aims to subvert the influence of fake news and disinformation by offering audiences something truthful that they like better and trust more.⁸⁶

Yochai Benkler led the research at Harvard and MIT looking at 1.25 million shared stories online during the US presidential campaign. He urges institutional media to wake up to the new "disinformation rich" digital environment in which their journalism has already been deliberately sliced and diced for disinformation. If reporters apply their professional training properly, he's optimistic there could be "a new golden age for the Fourth Estate."⁸⁷

He might be right. What's more certain is that the norms and values of journalism are ideals and using them in the real world is an imperfect process. No journalism achieves a fixed state of objectivity, impartiality, accuracy, fairness, balance or completeness. "The best obtainable version of the truth" is always an iterative process.⁸⁸ That said, the norms remain the last line of defense against journalism that quietly drifts into the captive world of disinformation and propaganda.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the entire Shorenstein Center team for their generous encouragement, to my patient research assistant, Steven Sunmonu, and to my wonderful BBC colleagues over 34 years from whom I learned so much.

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