

# 4

# Impartiality in the News

*Sue Wallace*

“The days of middle-of-the-road, balancing Left and Right, impartiality are dead”

Peter Horrocks

Modern media and impartiality

In 2010 a respected senior Middle East editor was sacked by CNN for a message on Twitter, because of criticism of the way she had commented on the death of a Muslim cleric. She had been fiercely condemned for a perceived lack of professionalism. Following the Arab Spring, the BBC was examining its own output, conducting a review of its reporting of those events of 2011 and later, on its national radio, television and online services. The concern connecting the two events is the concept of impartiality, a legal requirement for broadcast news in Britain. However, in the 21st century media landscape, the principle of impartial reporting is being challenged more strongly than ever. Contributory factors include the proliferation of television channels – hundreds have become available, with access aided by digital switchover in 2012. At the same time, convergence has blurred the distinctions between traditional news forms such as print, radio, television and online. Meanwhile citizens have benefited in their own exchanges through social media networks. Blogs and micro-blogs can be regarded as among the more recent entrants into the public sphere(s). With so much traffic in information publicly available, the question is increasingly being asked whether impartiality is a necessary requirement of news reporting. Indeed, it might be suggested that subjective, or opinionated reporting is more honest and true.

This chapter will consider current challenges to the notion of impartiality. It examines arguments about the need to retain the principle as a legal requirement in the UK for broadcast journalists, a requirement which is particularly fiercely con-

tested over television news, but also applies to radio reporting. At its heart is a question for all those who want to be journalists: whether it is better to reveal or withhold personal opinions. The chapter reviews the origins of notions of objective journalism, and the debate about its place in the modern news industry. It considers suggestions for a reworking of the tradition, such as the ‘radical impartiality’ proposed within the BBC, or partisan reporting in the style of British newspapers, and the impact such changes might have on the public’s trust in journalism. This chapter also discusses whether audiences, particularly young people, are badly served by present journalistic practices, and suggests what the debate may mean for journalism students and trainees.

#### Development of the tradition of impartiality

When the British Broadcasting Company began broadcasting news in 1922 (to become the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927) it instigated a long-lasting tension between government and the broadcasters. Initially prevented from reporting anything considered to be controversial, the BBC’s head (and first Director-General of the corporation) John Reith developed an argument that the radio service should be allowed to report significant events and views as long as it did so impartially. Notions of objectivity and impartiality are closely related, however Harcup (2009) disentangles the two: “impartial reporting is normally defined as being neutral, while objective reporting is taken to be the reporting of verifiable facts” (2009: 83). He also notes McQuail’s (2000) definition that impartiality means “balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also neutrality in the presentation of news – separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgements or emotive language or pictures.” (2000:321). Impartiality, then, became a defence against fears that broadcasting had such a power to sway public opinion that it might encourage dissent. When Independent Television News (ITN – part of the new commercial broadcasting operations) was established in 1955, ending the BBC’s monopoly of news broadcasting, it was a condition that it should present any news with due accuracy and impartiality, such considerations also extending to programming on matters

of political or industrial controversy, or public policy (Allan 2010:60). With just two broadcasting organisations in the country (BBC and ITV) it was still considered necessary to guard against one-sided – potentially misleading, if not inflammatory – reporting. Since the mid-twentieth century, impartiality has remained a requirement, not only of the BBC, but also one imposed on UK broadcasters by regulatory bodies, the latest of which is Ofcom, established by the Communications Act 2003. Ofcom's Broadcasting Code (2011a) states the principle that news, in whatever form, is reported with due accuracy and due impartiality. Impartiality is defined by Ofcom as not favouring one side over another, and due impartiality as being adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. As the BBC's College of Journalism (2012a) notes: "Impartiality requires a journalist to actively seek out and weigh the relevant arguments on any issue and to present them fairly and without personal bias." However, the College of Journalism (2012b) also acknowledges that impartiality is a complex requirement which may only be achieved over time, for example when a story is developing very fast and it may not be possible to get interviews with all participants immediately.

The same stricture of due accuracy and due impartiality is placed by Ofcom on reporting of matters of major political or industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy. This applies not only to Britain's public service broadcasters (PSBs), the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Five, but also other output such as Sky News and UK licensed foreign channels. Guidance notes (Ofcom 2011b) point out that a research study into public opinion on the subject in 2003 found that three-quarters of 4,000 respondents said impartiality in news was a good thing, and accuracy was viewed as even more important.

Moreover the provision of reliable news is considered to be a requirement for a healthy democracy. Citizens need to be well informed to be able to participate in, and contribute to society. McQuail (2010) examines normative theory, or "how the media ought to, or are expected to be organised and to behave in the wider public interest" (2010:161). He observes that common expectations are the provision of a diversity of information, opinion and culture, and the support of the democratic

political system. Rules on impartiality might be seen as a way of ensuring such diversity of coverage.

The challenges to impartiality

Nevertheless, the broadcasting scene in Britain no longer consists of just the “comfortable duopoly” (Peacock 1986: 36) of the BBC and ITV. We live in a multi-channel age, with television programmes available by satellite, cable, and digital relay, many not sourced in the UK. The complexities of the situation might be illustrated by the case of Press TV Limited, the company based in London and broadcasting news from an Iranian perspective. As Ofcom reports (2012), during 2011 it was engaged in a sanctions case with Press TV about an interview with a Channel 4 and Newsweek journalist, Maziar Bahari, which was obtained under duress while in an Iranian prison. Ofcom ruled that this was a serious breach of the broadcasting code, and a £100,000 fine was imposed on Press TV. During the hearing, however, Press TV suggested that editorial control of its channel rested in Tehran, which led Ofcom to offer to license that overseas operation. Receiving no response to the offer, Ofcom revoked Press TV’s licence to broadcast in the UK, with the expectation that the channel would be removed from the Sky TV platform by the end of January 2012. This protracted and difficult dispute is an example of the international domain within which the UK broadcasting regulator must operate.

Meanwhile, in the modern multi-platform environment, audio and video reports, often resembling traditional television and radio programming, are also available online. Leaders in the field of news and magazine websites include those such as [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk) and [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk) which originate in newspaper organisations. Unlike broadcasters, newspapers have never been subject to laws requiring that they abide by conditions of impartiality. Indeed, they are known for their partisan support for commercial interests and also political parties, particularly at election time. Famously *The Sun* ran the headline “It’s the Sun wot won it” on the day in April 1992 when the Conservatives celebrated an unexpected election victory over Labour. (In 2012 the paper’s owner, Rupert Murdoch, told the Leveson inquiry into press and standards that the headline was tasteless and wrong because ‘We don’t have that sort of power’. He

did, though, agree that the Sun's support for Labour before the 1997 election (which the party won) would have required his approval (Dowell 2012). Another of the media interests owned by Rupert Murdoch's company, News Corporation, is the most popular American cable news network, Fox News. This has been repeatedly held up as an example of right-wing bias in its reporting despite its mission statement to provide "fair and balanced" coverage (Sergeant 2011).

### Arguments for change

In any case, the internet is an unregulated forum for views of all styles and forms. Opinionated arguments and comment are readily available. Anticipating digital switchover in Britain in 2012, an Ofcom discussion document noted that "the expansion of digital channels and the internet mean there are now very many more sources of news than ever before. In future, when multiple sources – some regulated for impartiality, and others not – are all available through the same reception equipment, issues may be more complicated." (Ofcom 2007). Put more bluntly: "With dozens of news sources in addition to the BBC, what's the point of impartiality rules? It's a waste of time" said Simon Hinde of AOL (Ofcom 2007: 5.53).

Even BBC chiefs seem to favour change. "The days of middle-of-the-road, balancing Left and Right, impartiality are dead" said the corporation's head of television news, Peter Horrocks, in a speech at Oxford University in 2006. His comments brought an immediate backlash: "The BBC triggered outrage yesterday by calling for the views of extremists and fundamentalists to be given the same weight as those of mainstream politicians" reported the *Mail Online* (2006). This neatly illustrates the argument made in a seminal article by Gaye Tuchman (1999) that objectivity is a strategic ritual to defend journalists and their reports: "To journalists, like social scientists, the term 'objectivity' stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics" (1999: 297). Noting the time pressures that journalists usually face in their work, she outlines such standard practices as balancing a statement from one political party with a contradiction from an opposing party, without verifying which of the conflicting opinions is true. Indeed, the article notes that such "truth-claims" may be non-verifiable,

each representing one possible reality (Tuchman 1999:300).

Impartiality rules might equally be regarded as a defence for journalistic practices, just as the apparent abandonment of those rules might lay journalists open to criticism, such as that from the *Daily Mail*. The BBC's editorial guidelines, with their advice on how to approach controversial subjects to maintain impartiality, and action to take in difficult cases, could be regarded as promoting just such 'strategic rituals'. One foundation for the latest version of the guidelines came in the recommendation of the Neil Report in 2004 that reporters should provide "facts in their context, not opinion, practising openness and independence of mind and testing a wide range of views with the evidence" to achieve impartiality and diversity of opinion (BBC Press Office 2004). The report by former BBC news executive Ron Neil was in response to criticism of the corporation's editorial standards in the Hutton Inquiry, which included consideration of Andrew Gilligan's infamous broadcast at 6.07am on Radio 4's Today programme on 29th May 2003, claiming that the Labour government had "sexed up" a dossier on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (The Hutton Inquiry 2004). The BBC's chairman and director general both resigned following the *Hutton Report*. Neil's recommendations, including the establishment of a College of Journalism, aimed to provide a defence for the BBC against future criticism.

### The BBC position

However, the more recent BBC argument is more subtle than a complete abandonment of the principle of impartial reporting. In his speech in 2006, Peter Horrocks went on to say: "I believe we need to consider adopting what I like to think of as a much wider "radical impartiality" – the need to hear the widest range of views – all sides of the story. So we need more Taliban interviews, more BNP interviews – of course put on air with due consideration – and the full range of moderate opinions. [...] So get used to hearing more views that you dislike on our airwaves. This wider range of opinion is a worthwhile price to pay to maintain a national forum where all can feel they are represented and respected." (Jarvis 2006). This call for a "radical impartiality" can be seen as a response to the argument identified by Ofcom (2007) that "impartiality rules are

now resulting in similar types of news being delivered by an ever expanding number of channels, and that such ‘plurality’ is not the same as diversity of voice” (2007: 5.42). In addition there is also concern about the increasing disengagement from news particularly among young people and ethnic minorities. Ofcom’s qualitative research showed that 64 percent of young people (aged 16 to 24) believe that much of the news on TV is not relevant to them. Some ethnic minorities also considered that they were not treated fairly in news reporting. (Ofcom 2007: 61-63). Such trends had been markedly extended since previous research in 2002, including the migration of the audience to online sources of news.

A further consideration which might affect BBC policy is its ambition to provide a universal service, according to the respected American commentator Jeff Jarvis (2006). He suggests that Peter Horrocks in his speech is “responding to the internet age by trying to open the megaphone wider to more voices – to mimic that internet itself. This springs from the BBC’s license-fee-supported mission to supply “a universal news service” even in what Horrocks says is “a fragmented and segregated society”, in which fewer people believe they are being heard or served” (Jarvis 2006). Jarvis himself does not support the strategy. Instead, he favours the action he identifies in American journalism, of moving away from “the old, outmoded creed of objectivity” to the British newspaper tradition of partisan reporting. “The internet is imposing on American journalism that British newspaper model of many viewpoints; it is in the debate that democracy emerges” (Jarvis 2006).

### Opinionated broadcasting

This immediately conjures up the spectre of Fox News, Rupert Murdoch’s American cable news network, reportedly one of the world’s most profitable news organisations (The Economist 2011). It was launched in 1996 with the proposed ambition to provide “fine, balanced journalism”, but a real mission to bring conservative talk radio to television, according to Matthew Butler writing for [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk) (itself a liberal leaning organisation). Critics have accused Fox News of trading in right-wing propaganda, including smears and bigoted comments, according to Butler (2011). It has been claimed

that such a service is bad for democracy. However, Fox News executives underline the distinction between biased opinion, and what they consider their channel is really providing – passionate broadcast. They also argue that there is a clear division between their daytime news programmes (intended to offer comprehensive coverage of issues of the day) and their conservative-leaning, opinionated evening shows (Sergeant 2011). While conservatives might argue that Fox News merely provides some balance to a generally liberal media, critics point to consequences such as those outlined by Fairleigh Dickinson University. The university’s Public Mind Poll asked people living in the state of New Jersey about current events in the U.S. and abroad (such as the Arab Spring). One finding was that “people who watch Fox News, the most popular of the 24-hour cable news networks, are 18-points less likely to know that Egyptians overthrew their government than those who watch no news at all” (Fairleigh Dickinson University 2011). Findings such as this led to the widely publicised conclusion that “Some News Leaves People Knowing Less”.

In 2003 the then British government regulator ITC (Independent Television Commission) rejected complaints from viewers in the country about bias in coverage of the conflict in Iraq by Fox News, which holds a British licence. The verdict was that the organisation had not breached the programme code on ‘due impartiality’ because the regulations did not require broadcasters to be ‘absolutely neutral on every controversial issue’ (Jones 2003). This ruling was welcomed by Chris Shaw, Channel 5’s controller of news and current affairs, when he argued for more biased and opinionated broadcast journalism in Britain. In a debate organised by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, he said that “news with a slant” would create real diversity. Countering those claims, Richard Tait, ITN’s former editor-in-chief, warned that if British broadcasters were allowed to copy American formats, then the public’s high trust in broadcasters would plummet. In support of his argument he cited a recent opinion poll showing that only 6 per cent of people trust newspapers while 70 per cent trusted television news, describing the latter state of affairs as a public good. “But I don’t think we can go on doing news on TV as we do it at the moment” concluded Chris Shaw, who looked forward to a time when he could find coverage on TV which



“chimed” with campaigns by newspapers like the *Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* (Jones 2003).

Broadcasting with a deep-seated bias?

Part of Chris Shaw’s argument was a conviction of a deep-seated bias in British broadcasting. He stated, “Every news programme already comes with a ready-made set of prejudices. It is the same on both BBC and ITN: a middle class, essentially liberal and English, but not British, point of view” (Jones 2003). This, he suggested, was a cause of some groups, such as the young, ethnic minorities, and people less well educated, feeling alienated from broadcast news, and switching off. The idea that it is simply impossible to produce journalism with no bias at all, has backing in the academic world, as well as among some journalists. The very act of producing news involves the selection of information and opinions which may be influenced by bureaucratic, organisational, cultural, economic and political factors, the argument goes. “News and journalism, in short, are social constructions,” sums up Brian McNair. “News is never a mere recording or reporting of the world ‘out there’ but a synthetic, value-laden account which carries within it the dominant assumptions and ideas of the society within which it is produced” (McNair 2009: 40-41). Journalists may claim to tell the truth, but that “begs a rather awkward question: namely, whose definition of what is true is being upheld as ‘the truth’?” (Allan 2010: 71). Journalists’ routines and practices are likely to privilege some sources of information over others. Impartiality can therefore be seen as an unattainable ideal.

The need for trust

This might suggest that openly biased reporting is more honest than that which claims to tell the truth but may nevertheless be skewed. Journalism, indeed, “might benefit from a sense of its own subjectivity” (Charles 2011:2). BBC support for opinionated broadcasting has been further reinforced by Mark Thompson, as the BBC’s director general. In a Whitehall seminar he proposed that existing rules to guarantee impartiality were becoming outdated in the internet age, and that British broadcasters should be allowed to provide a channel like Fox News:

“Why shouldn’t the public be able to see and hear, as well as read, a range of opinionated journalism and then make up their own mind what they think about it?” (Sherwin 2010). However, he was not suggesting a change of direction for the BBC. Instead, he said that: “Having a broader range of channels would actually strengthen that enduring tradition of impartial journalism across BBC, ITN and Channel 4. They would continue to be trusted” (Sherwin 2010). Trust is a key idea here, and it may come to be more important than traditional notions of impartiality according to Ofcom (2007). Alternative concepts, such as transparency are championed as the way to gain and retain trust, by other commentators such as Jeff Jarvis (2006). The American academic Jay Rosen has also been reported as proposing that reporters should be open about their own views while producing factual accounts with accuracy, fairness and intellectual honesty, allowing transparency to replace the ideology of objectivity (The Economist 2011).

Credibility, or loss of it, was behind the decision by CNN to sack its Middle East editor Octavia Nasr in 2010. Her credibility was said to have been compromised by a controversial tweet about a Shia Muslim cleric in Lebanon who had longstanding ties to, and voiced strong support for Hezbollah – classified by the U.S. State Department as a foreign terrorist organisation (CNN Wire Staff 2010). The message she posted on Twitter after hearing about the death of Ayatollah Fadlallah stated: “Sad to hear of the passing of Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah...One of Hezbollah’s giants I respect a lot” (BBC News US & Canada 2010). She maintained she was referring to his views on women’s rights. However, in a blog posting the journalist afterwards said that the message was an error of judgement and something she deeply regretted. “Reaction to my tweet was immediate, overwhelming and provides a good lesson on why 140 characters should not be used to comment on controversial or sensitive issues, especially those dealing with the Middle East” (CNN Wire Staff 2010).

The impact on journalism students

Highly sensitive news events, such as conflict in the Middle East, particularly expose the arguments about impartiality and claims whether the practice is being observed not.

Hence the decision of the BBC Trust to carry out a review of the corporation's journalism on the events known as the Arab Spring, including protests and uprisings most notably in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen (BBC Trust 2011). The review of impartiality is focused on the corporation's national radio, television and online journalism. However, the increasing use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook has added a modern twist to the long-standing debate. As we have seen, the tight constraints of Twitter can mitigate against the provision of context to any comment posted. Nevertheless, it is increasingly used as a reporting and also news-gathering tool. The micro-blog is just one means by which ordinary people can contribute to journalism, particularly if they are witness to extraordinary events. Other social media, such as Facebook, also provide ways of reporters developing participatory journalism with groups and individuals. 'Amateurs' can further contribute to the public conversation through blogs, podcasts and video material.

One apparent difficulty is that such routes provide space for private as well as public communication. There is a danger that it could be difficult to separate the two for those practising journalism. As the social media editor for BBC News, Chris Hamilton (2011) has noted, this may introduce an element of risk for staff in news organisations. The BBC itself has a range of guidelines on personal and public use of social media, including the need for journalists writing on 'official' Twitter accounts to avoid openly partisan comments. The BBC's concern is to maintain its brand and commitment to the principles of impartiality. However, for journalism students and trainees, whose use of social media begins as private communication, it is suggested that they may need to be educated in developing their own professional persona as reporters and observers of the social and political scene. In this, they will need to have regard to the debates surrounding the concept of impartiality.

Factors to consider include the need to sustain public trust in journalism, but also to engage the audience. Transparency may be aided by an openness about reporters' personal views. Opinionated reporting, such as that seen in British newspapers, may be judged to be more honest, or attractive. Nevertheless, while complete impartiality may be an unattainable ideal, it can be seen to provide some guarantee of accuracy and fair

dealing in reporting important events. And the principle, challenged as it is by developments in the news industry and audience expectations, still remains a requirement on broadcast journalism in the UK.

## Challenging Questions

- Impartiality rules have helped to alienate young people from traditional broadcast news.
- The concept of impartiality is outdated and has no place in modern broadcasting.
- Journalists who express their opinions are more honest than those who try to be impartial.
- Consider the role of impartiality in building trust between journalists and their audiences.

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