

Review of impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of science

Terms of reference

March 2010

Background

Ensuring the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's content is a key priority for the Trust; it is essential to its independence that the BBC retains the public's trust as an impartial and accurate purveyor of news and programming. The BBC is required to deliver duly accurate and impartial news by the Royal Charter and Agreement and to treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality. The Trust is committed to making sure that the BBC fulfils this obligation.

The Trust approves the BBC's Editorial Guidelines (currently under review) which explain that "... impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC's commitment to its audiences. It applies across all our services and output whatever the format ...and includes a commitment to reflecting diversity of opinion".

Alongside approving the BBC's editorial framework, the Trust has to ensure that it is properly applied. Impartiality reviews allow the Trust to examine the BBC's impartiality in a specific area of output through a rigorous review which can, when deemed necessary, lead to change.

This will be the Trust's third impartiality review. Previous reviews looked at the coverage of business (2007); and the network news and current affairs reporting of the nations (2008). In addition, in 2007 the Trust and Executive published a report *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century*. Some of its guiding principles may be particularly useful here:

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

The scope of the review

The review will cover radio, television and online on the UK public services. It will assess news and factual output that refers to scientific findings, particularly where the science is itself controversial and where it relates to public policy and political controversy. "Science" in this context will be defined to include not just the natural sciences but also aspects of technology, medicine and the environment that entail statements, research findings or other claims made by scientists. The review will undertake the following:

- In considering accuracy, to assess whether assertions about scientific theories are well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear, precise language. In particular:
 - is material provided to the press by press release appropriately tested and presented?
 - is coverage sufficiently alert to both the strengths and shortcomings of peer reviewed material?
 - do the various partnership and financial models used to create the BBC's science content add to or compromise the approach to accuracy or impartiality?
 - does output have due regard for the devolved nature of science policy in the UK?
- In considering context, to take into account audience expectation and the amount of detail suitable for a diversity of outlets, services, and lengths.

In considering impartiality, to assess as necessary whether the output gives appropriate weight to scientific conclusions including different theories and due weight to the views expressed by those sceptical about the science and how it was conducted or evaluated.

In summary, it will ask whether the BBC's coverage of science taken as a whole, presents a partial view of the nature of science and the role science plays within society.

Scope limitations

Impartiality reviews are not performance reviews and will not evaluate quality or consider market impact. This review will not seek to make judgements on any areas of scientific debate; it will consider the BBC's approach to coverage of these areas. It will not include social sciences such as criminology and economics, and it will not include religious perspectives on science, creationism included, except as incidental to science itself.

Approach

The BBC editorial guidelines (which can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines) set out how impartiality and accuracy are to be attained in BBC content.

The Trust report will draw on an assessment from an independent author. He is Professor Steve Jones, Professor of Genetics and Head of department of Genetics, Evolution and Environment at University College London. Content research will be commissioned by the Trust to support the review from a university with expertise in conducting content analysis and in science and media. Professor Jones will be supported by an external project leader with knowledge of BBC production.

The main work streams of the review will include:

- Content Analysis
- Engagement with key stakeholders
- Input from Audience Councils
- Consultation with the BBC Executive
- Audience research if deemed appropriate

The results of the public engagement, the Executive's submission, content research and other sources of evidence will be analysed and considered by Professor Jones before his final assessment is presented to the Trust. When publishing its final report the Trust will also publish the evidence gathered as part of the review, including the Executive's submission.

Timetable	
January 2010	Review announced
February 2010	Author appointed
March 2010	Terms of reference agreed
Spring 2010	Content analysis begins
Summer /Autumn 2010	Author gathers evidence Engagement work begins Audience Council engagement
Winter 2010	Analysis by author
Spring 2011	Assessment finalised and presented to the Trust
Spring 2011	Executive response presented to the Trust
Spring 2011	Report published