

## **IMPARTIALITY AND DIVERSITY OF OPINION**

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Impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC's commitment to its audiences. It applies across all of our services and output, whatever the format, from radio news bulletins via our web sites to our commercial magazines and includes a commitment to reflecting a diversity of opinion.

The Agreement accompanying the BBC's Charter requires us to produce comprehensive, authoritative and impartial coverage of news and current affairs in the UK and throughout the world to support fair and informed debate. It specifies that we should do all we can to treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality in our news services and other programmes dealing with matters of public policy or of political or industrial controversy. It also states that the BBC is forbidden from expressing an opinion on current affairs or matters of public policy other than broadcasting.

Special considerations apply during the campaign periods for elections. See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy.

**In practice, our commitment to impartiality means:**

- we seek to provide a properly balanced service consisting of a wide range of subject matter and views broadcast over an appropriate time scale across all of our output. We take particular care when dealing with political or industrial controversy or major matters relating to current public policy.
- we strive to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented.
- we exercise our editorial freedom to produce content about any subject, at any point on the spectrum of debate, as long as there are good editorial reasons for doing so.
- we can explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue or provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed, but in doing so we do not misrepresent opposing views. They may also require a right of reply.
- we must ensure we avoid bias or an imbalance of views on controversial subjects.

- the approach to, and tone of, BBC stories must always reflect our editorial values. Presenters, reporters and correspondents are the public face and voice of the BBC, they can have a significant impact on the perceptions of our impartiality.
- our journalists and presenters, including those in news and current affairs, may provide professional judgments but may not express personal opinions on matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy. Our audiences should not be able to tell from BBC programmes or other BBC output the personal views of our journalists and presenters on such matters.
- we offer artists, writers and entertainers scope for individual expression in drama, arts and entertainment and we seek to reflect a wide range of talent and perspective.
- we will sometimes need to report on or interview people whose views may cause serious offence to many in our audiences. We must be convinced, after appropriate referral, that a clear public interest outweighs the possible offence.
- we must rigorously test contributors expressing contentious views during an interview whilst giving them a fair chance to set out their full response to our questions.
- we should not automatically assume that academics and journalists from other organisations are impartial and make it clear to our audience when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint.

### **ACHIEVING IMPARTIALITY**

Impartiality must be adequate and appropriate to our output. Our approach to achieving it will therefore vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of output, the likely audience expectation and the extent to which the content and approach is signposting.

Impartiality is described in the Agreement as “due impartiality”. It requires us to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. It does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view.

News, in whatever form, must be presented with due impartiality.

## **“CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS”**

In the United Kingdom controversial subjects are issues of significance for the whole of the country, such as elections, or highly contentious new legislation on the eve of a crucial Commons vote, or a UK wide public sector strike. See Section 10 Politics and Public Policy.

In the nations and regions of the UK, controversial subjects are those which have considerable impact on the nation or region. They include political or industrial issues or events which are the subject of intense debate or relate to a policy under discussion or already decided by local government.

In the global context, some controversial subjects such as national elections or referendums will obviously have varying degrees of global significance but will be of great sensitivity in the country or region in which they are taking place. We should always remember that much of the BBC's output is now available in most countries across the world.

We must ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight in the period during which a controversial subject is active. Opinion should be clearly distinguished from fact. When the issues involved are highly controversial and/or a decisive moment in the controversy is expected we will sometimes need to ensure that all of the main views are reflected in our output. This may mean featuring them in a single programme, or even a single item.

BBC online sites covering controversial subjects may offer links to external sites which, taken together, represent a reasonable range of views about the subject. We should normally try to ensure that when we link to third party sites this does not give strong grounds for concern that this breaches the law or the BBC Editorial Guidelines on harm and offence.

**Any approach by a government department to relay official messages or information films which involve a degree of public or political controversy must be referred to Chief Adviser Politics.**

## **WHERE BBC CONTENT OR THE BBC IS THE STORY**

Our reporting must remain accurate, impartial and fair even when our content, or the BBC itself, becomes the story. We need to ensure that our impartiality is not brought into question and presenters or reporters are not placed in a potential conflict of interest. It will be inappropriate to refer to either the BBC as “we” or the content as “our”. There should also be clear editorial separation between those reporting the story and those responsible for presenting the BBC's case.

### **IMPARTIALITY IN SERIES**

In achieving impartiality a series of programmes on the same service may be considered as a whole. The Agreement states that in this case due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles. For this purpose there are two types of series:

**Programmes dealing with the same or related issues, within an appropriate period and clearly linked.** In this case a series can include a strand with a common title, or two programmes (such as a drama and a debate about the drama) or a season of programmes on the same subject. These programmes need to achieve impartiality across the series or over a number of programmes within the series. The intention to achieve impartiality across a number of programmes should be planned in advance and normally made clear to the audience when the first programme is transmitted or when practicable.

**Programmes dealing with widely disparate issues from one programme to the next but also clearly linked as a strand with a common title.** These should normally achieve impartiality within individual programmes, or across two or three editorially linked programmes, rather than across the strand as a whole.

**We cannot achieve impartiality in this context by ensuring other views will be heard on other services.**

### **IMPARTIALITY AND DRAMA**

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.

### **PERSONAL VIEW AND AUTHORED PROGRAMMES AND WEBSITES**

We have a tradition of allowing a wide range of individuals, groups or organisations to offer a personal view or opinion, express a belief, or advance a contentious argument in our programmes or on our websites. Personal views can range from the outright expression of highly partial views by a campaigner, to the authored

view of a specialist or professional including an academic, scientist, or BBC correspondent, to those expressed through contributions from our audiences. Each can add to the public understanding and debate, especially when they allow our audience to hear fresh and original perspectives on well known issues.

Content reflecting personal views, or authored by an individual, group or organisation, or contributed by our audiences, particularly when dealing with controversial subjects, should be clearly signposted to audiences in advance.

Personal view and authored programmes and websites have a valuable part to play in our output. However when covering controversial subjects dealing with matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy we should:

- retain a respect for factual accuracy.
- fairly represent opposing viewpoints when appropriate.
- provide an opportunity to respond when appropriate for example in a pre-arranged discussion programme.
- ensure 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.

It is not normally appropriate for BBC staff or for regular BBC presenters or reporters associated with news or public policy related programmes to present personal view programmes on controversial subjects.

Online we may provide people with information and a place to meet and campaign on specific issues including matters of political or industrial controversy or matters relating to current public policy. However it is important that we observe the following:

- the BBC cannot endorse or support any personal views or campaigns.
- there should be a clear distinction between BBC content and content created by our users. It should also be clear what resources we are providing.

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- users should not campaign explicitly for or against political parties or candidates. This is particularly important in the period before an election (usually 25 working days before polling day).
- the site should not be used to promote commercial campaigns or fundraising.
- broadcast coverage of campaigns featured on a BBC site should treat these campaigns in exactly the same way as any other campaigns.
- candidates in a forthcoming election must not contribute to the site.