

Chapter 8. Partial to being impartial? Debates about balance in science journalism

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The norm of impartiality has been one of the most contentious aspects of science journalism. It commits science journalists to ensuring their reporting is not overly influenced by the perspective of just one section of society. In practice, this often means journalists seek out contrasting views when reporting on matters of public policy or on topics that are politically controversial. Throughout its existence, the BBC, the UK's national public service broadcaster, has been committed to impartiality, to the extent that the principle is fundamentally bound up in its identity. The BBC thus provides an instructive example of the challenges that impartiality can pose when reporting science-based stories, having been uniquely reflexive about how impartiality can be applied and how well it succeeds at meeting its own standards. Together with its global influence, this makes the BBC a revealing case for examining not only how impartiality is applied to science news in practice but also how it is conceptualised by news producers, news sources and news audiences. The impartiality of the corporation's coverage of science has been the subject of formal review and the balance of its climate change reporting, in particular, has repeatedly been the subject of critical commentary. This chapter examines this meta-discourse about impartiality for what it reveals about how journalists and scientists talk past each other when it comes to impartial news reporting. As I discuss, the disagreements are exacerbated by conceptual unclarity over the distinction between impartiality and objectivity and by the inherent difficulties entailed in separating fact from opinion.

The BBC is not alone in having struggled with how – and whether – to apply impartiality to the reporting of science-based issues, nor in being criticised for the resulting coverage. News outlets in many countries have been accused of applying 'false balance' (also sometimes referred to as 'false equivalence') by giving undue emphasis to views that are counter to the scientific consensus. As early as 1965, Howard Smith, a correspondent for the American Broadcasting Company, identified "false balance" as a problem in television journalism, citing as an example a CBS documentary on the risks of smoking in which doctors who recognised that smoking caused cancer were balanced with representatives of the tobacco industry (Smith, 1965). In recent years, it has more often been campaign groups – anti-vaxxers, creationists, climate deniers and others characterised as 'anti-science' contrarians – who have been identified as benefiting from journalists' use of false balance. Ideological and

corporate actors understand that they can most effectively undermine the case for policy action by supporting lobby groups to engage with the science within a policy debate. As the tobacco industry explicitly recognised, emphasising the uncertainties that are present in the relevant science can be sufficient to undermine the case for immediate action (Michaels, 2008; Mooney, 2010; Oreskes and Conway, 2010). Lobby groups thus hope to exploit the media access that journalistic balance can offer by taking the opportunity to make claims about the science.

A number of empirical studies have examined which viewpoints are present in news coverage of science-based issues in order to establish whether such groups do succeed in gaining media access through balanced reporting. Many of these studies have focused on the coverage of climate change, including a series of papers by Maxwell Boykoff assessing the proportion of US and UK news reports that present views that are contrary to the scientific consensus (Boykoff, 2007; Boykoff, 2008; Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Boykoff and Farrell, 2019; Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008; McAllister et al., 2021). Such studies find that in some types of coverage in some outlets at some times, climate sceptic views have been relatively common; in other outlets at other times, they are rarely given the same weight as the scientific consensus. Boykoff and his co-authors find an increase in the inclusion of sceptic voices in the US media during the 1990s and 2010s and attribute this to the activities of well-organised sceptic lobby groups who use tactics akin to those developed by the tobacco industry (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Boykoff and Farrell, 2019). However, sceptics have been found to be less common in climate coverage in non-anglophone countries (Painter, 2011; Dayrell and Urry, 2015). Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this large body of work is that it is hard to generalise about the prevalence of the practice.

Despite that, individual instances of climate reporting have provoked heated debate about news outlets' use of balance. Critics complain that the practice promotes fringe ideas, misleads the public, delays policy action and discourages behaviour change. How can it be that journalists and scientists – two professions that ostensibly share the aim to uncover the truth – can disagree so consistently and for so long about how science should be reported? This chapter seeks to explore this question by examining the case of the BBC's climate coverage.

Objectivity and impartiality: a short history

First, I consider what is meant by impartiality and the related, but distinct, concept of objectivity. Discussions often conflate these two terms, jumping between the two as if they were synonyms. Other terms also frequently come up: neutral, balanced, disengaged, dispassionate, non-partisan, independent, unbiased, disinterested, detached, fair, accurate,

truthful, factual and so on. This excess of vocabulary immediately indicates slippery concepts that are hard to pin down – a conceptual confusion that contributes to the underlying tensions over the reporting of science-based controversies. As I discuss later, these are exacerbated by science's own stake in some of these concepts: science journalists report on claims that have already been assessed for their accuracy and lack of bias.

Ever since news journalism first emerged in its professionalised form more than a century ago, it has been attended in western democracies by the twin aspirations of objectivity and impartiality. In the preceding century, news outlets seeking to combine public interest journalism with a wide market reach unlimited by partisan allegiances had developed a style of reporting that appeared to be politically neutral. In mid-nineteenth-century America, for instance, the penny press attempted to reach a mass audience by stressing its independence from government and political parties (Allan, 1997). This political neutrality was achieved through an editorial approach that emphasised facts. Despite charges of sensationalism, editors claimed they were meeting a public demand for information that was stripped of editorialising explanation and evaluation. As the *New York Herald* put it when it launched in 1835, the aim was to “record facts, on every public and proper subject, stripped of verbiage and coloring” (Allan, 1997: p 305). Similarly, when Adolph Ochs bought up the *New York Times* in 1896, he immediately announced that the paper would “give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved” (Ochs, 1896; see chapter 1). As Ochs made clear when he went on to state his commitment to the causes of tax reform and low taxes, this impartial approach to its reporting did not mean that the paper or its proprietor would forsake all opinion.

Sociologist Michael Schudson argues that these early moves towards fact-based reporting and political neutrality developed into the modern journalistic norm of objectivity in the years after the First World War (Schudson, 2001). Schudson suggests that objectivity should be understood as an institutionalised method – akin to the scientific method – for ensuring that journalists adopted a detached and disinterested approach to news. At the heart of this method were two techniques. One was the recently established practice of interviewing news actors and attributing quotes to them; this served as a means of distancing news outlets from the opinions they presented. The other was a clear separation between news reporting and comment. Newspapers would continue to print comment pieces, but these would be clearly labelled as such. As Schudson puts it: “The belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts’, a distrust of ‘values’, and a commitment to their segregation” (Schudson, 1981: p. 6). For science journalism, this often meant reporting new research findings as if they were established facts, hastening science along the path to a certainty that is not there in the laboratory (Collins, 1987; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Nelkin, 1987).

Whilst US newspapers adopted the ideal of objective reporting as a means of demonstrating their lack of partisanship, newspapers in other countries retained their political allegiances. In the UK, it was rather the development of broadcasting that led to an expectation of editorial neutrality, as the independent BBC needed to make a case that its monopoly of the airwaves would not be a threat to the government if it was allowed to cover controversial news (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). This it did this through a strong emphasis on impartiality.

Having begun as an implicit professional norm adopted by broadcasters for their own purposes, over the course of the twentieth-century impartiality was codified and mandated, becoming a legal requirement for news broadcasters in many countries, especially in Europe (Cushion, 2012: 33). In the US, too, for a time, broadcasting was subject to the Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to ensure balanced coverage on matters of public importance. Today in the UK, all broadcasters are required by the Communications Act 2003 to present news with due impartiality (Ofcom, 2021). Even where impartiality is not imposed through legislation, public service broadcasters around the world espouse impartiality as an ideal. Both objectivity and impartiality have been enshrined in the ethical codes and editorial guidelines of professional bodies and regulatory authorities (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Guidelines on how to produce objective or impartial journalism also often highlight the need for a balanced account of opposing views. For instance, the code of ethics drawn up by the international Ethical Journalism Network notes under the heading of impartiality that: “Most stories have at least two sides. While there is no obligation to present every side in every piece, stories should be balanced and add context” (EJN, 2022). It is this practice that has attracted criticism in the context of science journalism.

The norms of objectivity and impartiality arose around the desire for politically neutral reporting, yet even in political journalism, providing balance can be challenging when there are multiple parties or diverse views within parties. The situation is more challenging still for cross-cutting issues that transcend party divides. This is the case with many science-based controversies, where mainstream parties may all agree but a significant – or at least vocal – element of public opinion differs, or where the issue is too new for the mainstream parties even to have a position. Despite this, the exemplar of balance in a two-party political system still guides the reporting of such issues with the result that perspectives on a controversy are frequently reduced to two opposing sides. Furthermore, these opposing sides must be sufficiently different from each other to clearly represent differing opinions. Nuanced differences in opinion therefore tend to be neglected in favour of outright disagreement. Thus a balanced-access approach derived from political reporting polarises and extremises complex issues, including issues drawing on scientific evidence.

Both objectivity and impartiality have been criticised as unattainable ideals that disguise biases within the news media: facts are inextricably laden with values; impartiality only

operates within (sometimes quite narrow) cultural norms drawn from the wider society; and story selection inevitably entails implicit judgements about what is important. For instance, in an influential academic analysis of British television, the Glasgow Media Group argued that the ideal of objective and impartial news “merely leads to a ‘naturalism’ on the level of stylistics which hides its ideological components” (1980, p. 402). In the US, in what have become known as the ‘objectivity wars’, some journalists have rejected the norm of objectivity altogether, charging it with passing off as neutral the biased standpoint of white privilege (Lowrey, 2020). Others, however, suggest that this rejection of objectivity mistakes process for outcome by attributing objectivity to the journalist rather than the method. As journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel put it in their *Elements of Journalism*, “objectivity has become a trap. The term has become so misunderstood and battered, it mostly gets the discussion off track” (2001: p. 41). Indeed, one of the traps is that the terms objectivity and impartiality – having evolved together from the shared impulse for independent, politically neutral journalism – are often used synonymously, yet, as Kovach and Rosenstiel again state clearly, “impartiality was never what was meant by objectivity” (p. 95).

On the one hand, objectivity describes an orientation towards reality that is independent of an individual’s experience, an attempt to capture an external reality that persists regardless of what people think about it. Objectivity, then, is concerned with independently verifiable facts about the world. Accuracy, facticity, and, in a limited sense, truthfulness, speak to this idea of objectivity. Impartiality, on the other hand, describes an orientation towards other people; in particular, how one treats the opinions and beliefs of others. Concepts such as neutrality, balance and non-partisanship share this orientation. So where objectivity is an epistemological principle concerned with verifiable knowledge, impartiality is a principle of justice; or, as BBC journalist Clive Myrie (2022) has said: “Impartiality is simply what’s fair.” In its orientation towards opinion, impartiality is concerned with the treatment of *subjective* realities. Objectivity and impartiality emerge from the same editorial impulse and both strive towards non-partisan truth-telling, yet in how they try to achieve this, they pull in exactly opposite directions.

To complicate matters further, as a reporting technique, balance can serve both objectivity and impartiality. Whilst it can serve impartiality by acknowledging contrasting opinions, it serves objectivity by attributing factual claims to others in place of passing a judgement on their truth. Especially in the US, where objectivity has been the primary journalistic norm, balance is often understood in this way as a “surrogate for validity checks” (Dunwoody and Peters, 1992: p. 210). Balance also has a third function: by portraying conflict, contrasting opinion enhances newsworthiness, especially if that opinion comes from a famous figure.

Of course, terms such as objectivity and impartiality are used loosely and flexibly in everyday discourse and their meanings have evolved historically. The point here is not to make a claim about correct usage; rather, it is to highlight that debates about journalistic standards rarely distinguish between two interconnected but distinct – and sometimes conflicting – ideals: objectivity is about telling the truth through a detached and unbiased gathering of the known facts; impartiality aims to tell the truth through a detached and unbiased gathering of perspectives. If objectivity aspires to the ‘view from nowhere’, as philosopher Thomas Nagel (1989) famously put it, and those who reject objective reporting aspire to a ‘view from somewhere’, as US journalist Lewis Raven Wallace has put it (2023), then impartiality aspires to ‘views from everywhere’.

It is no coincidence that the journalistic norm of objectivity arose at the same time as another version of objectivity was formalised as the central component of the scientific method (Galison, 2015; Mindich, 1998; Schudson, 2001). Scientists, too, are interested in collecting verifiable facts about the world and developing theories that explain these facts. A scientist’s personal route to a theory may be influenced by subjective factors, but in modern science the aim is always that the final outcome is objective in that it captures an aspect of reality that is untainted by that personal journey (Daston and Galison, 2007). Significantly, however, scientists have no norm of impartiality in the sense of being inclusive of alternative perspectives. They are expected to give due credit to the work of others, but there is no expectation that they take account of subjective realities that might exist in addition to the objective facts. Indeed, science as a body of knowledge is partial in the sense that it admits no alternative to a scientific understanding of the world (even though individual scientists might simultaneously hold both scientific and religious views). This fundamental difference lies at the heart of the culture clash between scientists and journalists. As I discuss below in relation to the BBC’s climate coverage, this has led to scientists implying that science is a special case where the norms of journalism should not apply.

Institutionalised impartiality at the BBC

Impartiality has always been a guiding principle for UK broadcasting. From its inception in 1922, the BBC was required to be both editorially independent of government and representative of the national culture in order for it to discharge its monopoly of access to the airwaves in a manner consistent with the public interest. Initially the corporation was forbidden from covering political controversies, but it soon won the right to do so by promising, in the words of the then managing director John Reith, to “guarantee absolute impartiality” (Hanretty, 2009: p. 186). In practice, it was recognised that absolute impartiality was impossible and eventually it would be ‘*due impartiality*’ that was written into the

statutory requirements placed on the BBC. This required that the broadcaster include differing viewpoints when covering matters of public controversy.

Impartiality was seen as being closely tied to, but distinct from, objectivity. For example, the advisory paper of 1935 that first set out what impartiality meant at the BBC, explained that it entailed the “objective presentation of all the alternative points of view” (Hanretty, 2009: p. 186). Over the following decades, the BBC’s commitment to impartiality became a central part of its institutional identity. Public service broadcasters in many other countries followed the model making similar, albeit often more limited, commitments to impartial news reporting. Like US newspapers, the early BBC also instituted a clear separation between news and comment (see chapter 2) and its current editorial guidelines on the impartial treatment of controversial subjects continue to require that: “Opinion should be clearly distinguished from fact” (BBC, 2023a).

Impartiality remains central to the BBC’s core values and the BBC has frequently reflected on how it can be applied; a tendency that geneticist Steve Jones, in a review of the BBC’s science coverage, describes as having a “theological intensity” (BBC Trust, 2011). The current Royal Charter that grants the BBC its license to operate lists as the first purpose of the corporation: “To provide impartial news and information” (BBC, 2016: p. 5). Perhaps surprisingly, this appeal to impartiality enfold assumptions about cultural values, as the Charter goes on to direct that the corporation’s news coverage is to be “firmly based on British values of accuracy, impartiality, and fairness” (p. 6). Indeed, impartiality has always been understood to be applicable only as long as it did not transgress the values that underpinned British democracy. Thus, speaking in the 1960s, the then Director General Sir Hugh Greene explained:

In talking about the BBC’s obligation to be impartial I ought to make it clear that we are not impartial about everything. There are, for instance, two very important exceptions. We are not impartial about crime ... nor are we impartial about race hatred. (Tulloch, 1990: p. 148)

Impartiality, then, was to work within the bounds of national consensus, even if vocal and perhaps sizable minorities disagreed with that consensus. These limits remain in place today, with the BBC guidance on impartiality stating explicitly that “the BBC’s impartiality is not value free” and that “it incorporates the values of a democratic society”, along with the unambiguous statement: “The BBC is not impartial on racism” (BBC, 2023b). This notion of impartiality being limited by a social consensus is particularly relevant when it comes to science reporting where, additionally, a scientific consensus may exist.

The corporation’s current conception of impartiality has been influenced by a 2007 report commissioned by the BBC’s then-governing body, the BBC Trust. According to the report author, independent programme maker John Bridcut, impartiality “involves a mixture of

accuracy, balance, context, distance, evenhandedness, fairness, objectivity, open-mindedness, rigour, self-awareness, transparency and truth.” To this already long list of essential constituents, Bridcut added “completeness” to emphasise the importance, as he saw it, of presenting a breadth of view (Bridcut, 2007: pp. 5-6). This did not mean providing equal space for every possible position, Bridcut explained, 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” (p. 38).

For Bridcut, the breadth of views to be included, and the weight they should be given, was to be guided by public opinion. Thus the impartial journalist needs to sense “where the preponderance of opinion lies on any issue [...]. It is the challenge for the content-provider to calibrate the range of views and their proportionate weight in the output” (Bridcut, 2007: p. 39). Bridcut noted that climate change was one subject where journalists needed to make these sorts of judgements, and where such judgements could be unpopular. He reported that a high-level seminar at the BBC about broadcasting on climate change had concluded that “the weight of evidence no longer justifies equal space being given to the opponents of the consensus.” But, Bridcut added, “dissenters (or even sceptics) will still be heard, as they should, because it is not the BBC’s role to close down this debate” (p. 40).

It is this desire for a diversity that is representative of *public*, rather than *expert*, opinion that has led to concerns about some science coverage. Yet Bridcut’s earlier inclusion of a proviso – “provided that the points of view are rationally and honestly held” – is significant. Public opinion was not the only factor to be considered. Notably, Bridcut’s list of the essential elements of impartiality included accuracy, objectivity and truth. Yet it was *honesty*, not accuracy or facticity or veracity, that he identified as the main criterion by which to assess the legitimacy of an opinion – and one can honestly hold an opinion that is misguided, ill-informed or based on incorrect facts.

In addition to requiring due impartiality, the BBC also expects its output to display due accuracy, recognising this as a property distinct from due impartiality. Accuracy, the guidelines note, “is not simply a matter of getting facts right”; opinions may also need to be considered and all information weighed to reach the truth. Originally, the “due” caveat in both the impartiality and accuracy requirements indicated that the treatment would depend on the nature of the programme. Increasingly, however, it is “due weight” that is referenced. This resembles the “weight-of-evidence” strategy called for by science journalism scholar Sharon Dunwoody (2005), who has proposed that differing views should be reported but in a manner that shows where the bulk of the evidence and expert opinion lies. In the case of the BBC, the current guidelines for due impartiality state: “minority views should not necessarily be given similar prominence or weight to those with more support or to the prevailing consensus” (BBC, 2023a). However, the guidelines also go on to note that: “There may be

occasions when the omission of views or other material could jeopardise impartiality. There is no view on any subject which must be excluded as a matter of principle, but we should make reasoned decisions, applying consistent editorial judgement, about whether to include or omit perspectives” (BBC, 2023a).

Contesting the BBC’s climate coverage

Its sensitivity to the question of impartiality has made the BBC highly reflexive about its reporting of climate change. Between 1997 and 2004, senior BBC editors participated in a series of seminars with climate scientists and policy specialists. One participant recalls the BBC editors asking for the science and policy communities to be “more insistent and audible in the review of media performance” in order to shift the centre of gravity of the reporting (Smith, 2005: p. 1472). Similarly, an internal seminar, convened in 2006 as part of John Bridcut’s re-evaluation of impartiality, included discussion of the extent to which impartiality should apply to climate reporting. Jana Bennet, then the BBC’s Director of Television and formerly the head of science programming, advised her colleagues that, rather than “deciding some kind of fairness”, they had a “duty to understand where the weight of the evidence has got to” (Bridcut, 2007: Appendix D, p. 103). Indeed, already in 2005, the Editorial Guidelines had specified, in the context of reporting risk, that: “If a contributor’s view is contrary to majority scientific or professional opinion, the demands of accuracy may require us to make this clear” (BBC, 2005).

Despite this, in the years since, the BBC has frequently been accused of allowing impartiality to distort its coverage. This has especially been the case in its reporting of climate change where both institutional statements and specific broadcasts have provoked criticism. These include a 2011 report on the impartiality of the corporation’s science coverage and news items featuring Nigel Lawson, the founding chairman of a climate sceptic lobby group and a former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose newsworthiness as a famous figure ensured he was the preferred choice for contrarian comment.

The 2011 report was commissioned by the BBC’s then-governing body, the BBC Trust, as one of a series of annual impartiality reviews of aspects of the BBC’s output. The review consisted of a report by geneticist Steve Jones, a commentary by the BBC Trust and a response from the BBC Executive (BBC Trust, 2011). In his report, Jones drew on a series of interviews with BBC journalists and programme makers, scientists, politicians and others, and also on a content analysis of the BBC’s science output commissioned by the BBC Trust which I led (Mellor et al., 2011). The content analysis had found little evidence of the use of balance across the BBC’s news coverage of science as a whole, but balance was used more frequently in news stories dealing with controversial policy issues. About half of these

broadcast reports, though only a quarter of such stories online, included a contributor making a critical comment about the science, whether pointing up a limitation of the science or making a more oppositional challenge. Those making oppositional comments were most likely to be non-scientists.

Alongside praising the BBC for the quality and breadth of its coverage, in his report Jones concluded that “false balance” had become widespread for some topics, with programmes “presenting the views of tiny and unqualified minorities as if they have the same weight as the scientific consensus” (BBC Trust, 2011: p. 55). Jones described hearing widespread concerns from the scientific community about the BBC’s “insistence on bringing in dissident voices into what are in effect settled debates” (p. 55). Indeed, even before the review had got underway, commentators had already flagged up false balance as the key problem (Colquhoun, 2010; Nature, 2010; Henderson, 2010).

It was this charge of false balance that dominated responses to the review, with news headlines stating that the BBC had been found to give too much time to fringe views (e.g., Connor, 2011; Foster, 2011; Henderson, 2011; Revoir, 2011; Sample, 2011). Opinion pieces took a similar angle (e.g., Nutt, 2011; Toynbee, 2011). False balance continued to frame discussion of the BBC’s coverage of climate change for years to come, in the UK and around the world; in 2014, for instance, an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* commented on a BBC update on the earlier impartiality review under the headline: “The distorting reality of ‘false balance’ in the media” (vanden Heuvel, 2014).

By contrast, responses to the review in the right-wing press claimed that the BBC was set to silence dissenting views. In a move that was itself an attempt at silencing, Nigel Lawson (2011) wrote that he had instructed his lawyers to issue the BBC with a letter demanding an apology for what he alleged was a false accusation against him in Jones’ report. Lawson claimed that the BBC already had a clear policy not to include climate sceptics in reports about climate change.

In fact, the BBC Executive’s response to the review had been more ambivalent than accusations of censorship implied. It acknowledged that there would be times when non-scientific opinion was not relevant, but also other times “when it is appropriate to broadcast a range of views, including some from non-experts, because science cannot be divorced from the social, political and cultural environment in which it operates” (BBC Trust, 2011: pp. 9-10). The corporation promised to hold two seminars for staff on scientific issues and to establish an online training module on reporting science, which in the event ran for only about a year (Hope, 2017).

This action was not sufficient to stem criticisms and formal complaints. In 2014, a report by the parliamentary committee that oversees issues relating to science excoriated the BBC for

“mistakes in their coverage of climate science by giving opinions and scientific fact the same weight” (House of Commons, 2014: p. 20). The report found that individual editors lacked the ability to determine the level of expertise of programme contributors and recommended that the BBC develop additional editorial guidelines for the coverage of climate change to enable presenters to challenge statements that departed too far from the scientific facts.

Just a couple of months later, the BBC was found to have mishandled an interview on the flagship radio news programme *Today*, which had pitched Nigel Lawson against Brian Hoskins, a professor of meteorology and Director of the Grantham Institute for Climate Change in London. The BBC had initially defended itself by justifying Lawson’s inclusion in the programme on the grounds that it was legitimate for him to debate the economic implications of climate policies (Pidcock, 2014). Complainants claimed that in fact Lawson spoke about the science; in particular, he had rejected Hoskin’s summary of the evidence showing an increase in extreme weather events. The BBC’s Editorial Complaints Unit found that the programme had not made it sufficiently clear that Lawson’s views were not supported by the research, and that his treatment within the item had implied that his views were on an equal footing with Hoskins’ views (ECU, 2014). The corporation’s response was again to offer senior journalists the opportunity to attend (the now defunct) training course. Lawson responded by saying he’d been banned and again accused the “Stalinist” BBC of silencing debate about climate (Lawson, 2014).

A similar sequence of events played out in 2017 when the Editorial Complaints Unit upheld a complaint from the Green Party about another Lawson interview on the *Today* programme. The programme makers had defended the interview on the grounds of providing impartiality: “The BBC’s role is to hear different views so listeners are informed about all sides of debate and we are required to ensure controversial subjects are treated with due impartiality” (BBC, 2017). Again, the corporation justified Lawson’s inclusion due to his economic expertise. On this occasion the complaint also went to the broadcast regulator, Ofcom, which found that the interview had breached the Broadcast Code (Ofcom, 2018). Ofcom found that the programme’s failure to challenge scientific claims made by Lawson in the course of the interview had led to significant inaccuracies and had therefore breached the requirement for due accuracy.

Likely in response to the Ofcom ruling, the following year the BBC introduced another training course, this time specifically on reporting climate change. A leaked email about the new course from the BBC’s director of news and current affairs, Fran Unsworth, included a “crib sheet” on climate reporting. This began by admitting that the BBC got its climate coverage “wrong too often”. Second on a list itemising the BBC’s position, after a statement accepting that anthropogenic climate change is happening, was the advice that journalists

should: “Be aware of ‘false balance’” (Hickman, 2018). Casting the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in the role of referee, the memo continued:

To achieve impartiality, you do not need to include outright deniers of climate change in BBC coverage, in the same way you would not have someone denying that Manchester United won 2-0 last Saturday. The referee has spoken. However, the BBC does not exclude any shade of opinion from its output, and with appropriate challenge from a knowledgeable interviewer, there may be occasions to hear from a denier. (Hickman, 2018)

Once again, the BBC was seeking a formulation that simultaneously recognised the scientific consensus as the best statement of fact and a reliable source of objective knowledge, while still leaving room for the corporation to discharge its democratic function in giving voice to a wide range of public opinion.

As the 2017 Ofcom ruling illustrates, complaints that originate as concerns about false balance often transform into complaints about the presence of incorrect claims by the time they are upheld by regulators. As Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute for Climate Change, pointed out on the eve of the publication of the 2011 impartiality review: “the real challenge for the BBC is not just to ensure the impartiality of its coverage of climate change, but also to uphold its equally important commitment to accuracy” (Ward, 2011). In its attempts to be inclusive of a diversity of views around scientific issues, the BBC risks introducing factual inaccuracies. The otherwise similar norms of impartiality and objectivity seem to be in conflict. This is the core difficulty that journalists must navigate.

From false balance to scientific exceptionalism

Steve Jones’ review of the impartiality of the BBC’s science coverage recommended that the BBC take “a less rigid view of ‘due impartiality’ as it applies to science” (BBC Trust, 2011: p. 17). Some of the people he had interviewed in the course of compiling his report – specifically, some of those with science backgrounds – had proposed that the BBC guidelines should be amended to exempt science from some of its editorial policies (p. 76). Jones himself thought this went too far as it could provoke allegations of censorship, like those since witnessed around climate reporting. Yet Jones, too, expected science to be treated as a special case, albeit through “the application of common sense” rather than through formal editorial directives. To Jones and other scientists similarly frustrated by news outlets’ use of balance, science is unique in that the processes of organised science already ensure that the output of science is objective and evidenced. As Jones put it, where many fields tolerate – or even welcome – opposing opinions, “science deals, most of the time, with opposed *evidence*” (p. 56; emphasis added). Journalists, he implies, should trust what scientists say.

Yet evidence only becomes opposed to other evidence if it has been subjected to someone's opinion – albeit an expert opinion – in an act of interpretation that judges the applicability, relevance and robustness of each finding (see, e.g., Hilgartner, 2000). Jones acknowledged this by allowing that it could be relevant to use a balance of voices in science journalism. Like those who frame their concerns in terms of 'false equivalence', he proposed that balancing comments could be appropriate provided they only came from experts. He called this exclusionary approach an "equality of voice": "a match of scientists not with politicians or activists, but with those qualified to take a knowledgeable, albeit perhaps divergent, view of research" (p. 16). To scientists like Jones, then, impartiality and objectivity are in conflict because science is already objective. The conflict is resolved, the suggestion is, by accepting that only scientists can challenge scientists.

The difficulty is that the processes of peer review are not infallible and that, in any case, scientists do not only comment on scientific knowledge that has passed through such tests. Scientists also explain how the science is relevant to policy decisions; they consider emerging science that has not yet had time to resolve into a consensus (as was most evident in the early stages of the Covid pandemic); and, not infrequently, they claim that the scientific evidence supports a particular policy direction. These are not matters that are reducible to objective statements that are provable through experimental or mathematical methods; they involve value judgements and opinion. To exempt such claims from challenge by politicians or campaigners, who may have a much better understanding of the social consequences or moral limits of policy positions advocated by scientists, would be a significant restriction on democratic debate. An approach to balance that was based on scientific exceptionalism would privilege narrow technical expertise over broader contextual understandings.

Conclusion

Journalists use balance for multiple reasons: to construct newsworthiness and to satisfy the journalistic norms of both objectivity and impartiality. In serving these two separate norms, balance reinforces the confusion between the epistemological principle of objectivity, with its focus on accuracy and facticity, and the democratic principle of impartiality, with its focus on fairness and diversity of media access. The concept of 'false balance', in using the language of falsity, foregrounds the use of balance as a substitute for, and therefore a threat to, objectivity and simultaneously obscures the use of balance to ensure fair representation.

The BBC, like other news outlets, has tried to walk a line between its twin obligations of accuracy and impartiality. Its editorial policy acknowledges that balance is just one mechanism through which impartiality may be achieved, that impartiality has limits and that accuracy is also essential (BBC, 2023a). Yet, for over a decade, scientists and climate

campaigners have complained that the corporation's interpretation of its impartiality requirements has led to the use of false balance in its climate coverage by opposing the accurate statements of climate scientists with the inaccurate claims of climate sceptics. Climate sceptics, on the other hand, have complained that the corporation is failing to be impartial by censoring contrarian voices.

Journalists at outlets around the world, including at the BBC, have often applied balance in ways that have allowed misleading claims about climate change to get airtime. Yet to characterise this as false balance is to imply that journalists overuse balance. One of the ironies of the commentary about impartiality is that, in fact, balance is rarely used in science journalism. For instance, the content analysis supporting the BBC's science review found that only one third of broadcast science news reports included comments from more than one contributor; even when more than one contributor was included, this often came from sources connected to the research or the research organisation (Mellor et al., 2011). Most of this science news was sourced from press releases, meaning that the BBC's science news rarely balances a source's promotional perspective with an alternative, disinterested perspective. Evidence for churnalism at other outlets (see chapter 4) suggests that the BBC might not be unusual in avoiding balance when reporting new research findings.

Another irony is that scientists, whom one might expect to value impartial analysis, have often taken up positions that seem to reject impartial journalism even as an ideal. In settling on the convenient slogan of 'false balance', the critics of journalistic impartiality invoke a logic that appeals to scientific exceptionalism. Impartiality is not the only aspect of media standards where it has been proposed that science should be treated as a special case: during a revision of UK libel law, scientists and others petitioned – with partial success – for scientific claims to be exempted from possible libel actions (Mullis and Scott, 2014). In the case of impartiality, exempting scientific news sources could place further limits on journalistic scrutiny in a field where there is already relatively little questioning of news sources. By construing the problem as a failure to respect the special status of scientific knowledge, the concept of false balance misdirects attention away from the manipulative practices of lobbyists (including some scientists) acting on behalf of powerful vested interests, towards journalists' supposed inability to understand scientific method.

The BBC is highly exposed to political pressure and commercial competition, leaving it little room to manoeuvre between losing its independence and losing its audience. A public service broadcaster like the BBC does not have the luxury to ignore public opinion. When social media channels amplify organised climate denialism – or other campaigns that reject a scientific consensus – to the extent that a significant proportion of the population are exposed to such messages, the BBC has to address this in some way. Balanced, objective and impartial reporting need not mean allowing inaccurate claims to pass unchallenged, nor

allowing unacknowledged vested interests to be promoted. Indeed, those traditional journalistic norms can be used to expose the manipulation of public opinion, as some broadcasters – including the BBC – have recognised in appointing specialist disinformation correspondents.

Balance can be applied thoughtfully – for instance, to draw out the assumptions behind a scientific claim, or to expose the manipulation of public opinion. Or it can be applied poorly – as an unthinking recourse to over-exposed commentators who polarise public debate. The lack of scrutiny of scientific claims in routine science reporting leaves science journalism ill-prepared to deal with controversial policy issues where science is an essential ingredient in good policymaking, but where it can also become a resource to be continually un-done in order to delay policy action. The question is not whether balance is a valid journalistic method in the context of science, as those who complain about false balance imply, but whether the lack of balance in routine science news and the perfunctory use of balance in reporting science-based policy issues makes science journalism unusually vulnerable to becoming a platform for the strategic communications of self-interested groups.

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