

## Framing the cuts: an analysis of the BBC's discursive framing of the ConDem cuts agenda

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## **Framing the cuts: An analysis of the BBC's discursive framing of the ConDem cuts agenda**

Jilly Boyce Kay and Lee Salter

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# Framing the cuts: An analysis of the BBC's discursive framing of the ConDem cuts agenda

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**Jilly Boyce Kay**

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

**Lee Salter**

University of Sussex, UK

## Abstract

This study analyses the discursive framing of the British government's economic policies by BBC News Online. Specifically, it focuses on the coverage of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010, in which the details of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's broader 'austerity' agenda were released. Using frame analysis informed by critical theory, we analyse three online BBC features and compare their framing of the economic crisis – and the range of possible policy responses to it – with that of the government's.

In addition, we analyse editorial blogs and training materials associated with the BBC's special 'Spending Review season'; we also situate the analysis in the historical context of the BBC's relationship with previous governments at moments of political and economic crisis.

Contrary to dominant ideas that the BBC is biased to the left, our findings suggest that its economic journalism discursively normalises neoliberal economics, not necessarily as desirable, but certainly as inevitable.

## Keywords

BBC news, Comprehensive Spending Review, critical theory, cuts, debt crisis, framing

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### Corresponding author:

Lee Salter, School of Media, Film and Music, University of Sussex, Silverstone Building, Arts Road, Falmer, East Sussex BN1 9RG, UK.

Email: salter.lee@googlemail.com

## Introduction

This article analyses the BBC's online coverage of the British Conservative-Liberal Democrat (ConDem) coalition government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) of 2010. The Spending Review formed part of the government's response to the economic crisis that began in 2007/8. In the CSR, the Chancellor of the Exchequer outlined the details of his 'austerity' programme, amounting at that point to £81 billion in cuts to public spending. Here, we analyse the extent to which the BBC facilitated clear understanding of available political options, and scrutiny of and challenge towards government economic policy in accordance with its democratic duties.

Performing a close analysis of three key features that form part of the BBC's online CSR coverage, we draw on Entman's (1993, 2004, 2007) frame analysis to understand how 'some aspects of a perceived reality [were made] more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (1993: 52); in this case, how the economic crisis was defined, interpreted, and evaluated by BBC News Online, and which 'treatments' were promoted as legitimate and credible.

We consider how the framing of the "debate" afforded the possibility of deliberation among and between citizens. In addition, we are interested in which and how "questions" are posed to citizens, and the degree to which debate around economic and political *alternatives* is facilitated.

The analysis explores the specific institutional context of the BBC, in terms of its public service remit, its editorial guidelines, and its stated intentions for its CSR coverage. We also analyse the government's own framing of the CSR, specifically its 'Spending Challenge'; we consider the extent to which the BBC challenged or reproduced this government framing.

By situating the three BBC texts in their institutional, historical, political and discursive contexts, we hope to demonstrate how qualitative analysis of these texts can provide insights into the processes by which the hegemony of neoliberalism is discursively sustained. It is neither the remit nor the intention of this article to determine the extent to which audiences uncritically accepted the dominant frames in these features; rather, our interest is in how a powerful institution such as the BBC – which is ostensibly protected from market forces – delineates the boundaries for "legitimate" political debate.

## Theoretical framework: Instrumental rationality and the closure of democratic space

Frankfurt School scholars, such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, and later Jürgen Habermas, developed their research projects to understand the expansion of bureaucratic modernism in different states. The present was, for the early Frankfurt School, distorted by the 'iron cage of modernity', in which the notions of understanding and evaluation are supplanted by bureaucratic, or instrumental rationality, in which a technical form of cost-benefit analysis underpins all decision-making. In this respect, the immediately given is hypostatized; it freezes the status quo as an inevitable and necessary truth. For the Frankfurt School, such positivism led to the *loss of the category of*

*potentiality and possibility – the existing order is taken to exhaust all possible alternatives*' (Adorno, cited in Held, 1980: 169, emphasis added).

On Habermas's (1987) analysis, modernity brought about not only the totalising bureaucracy that so concerned his predecessors, but also the *potential* for the liberation of reason from the binds of tradition on the one hand, and from the repressive characteristics of instrumentalisation of reason brought about by the state and capital.

The release of reason from traditionally bound worldviews allows for self-determination through democracy based on 'communicative rationality', which is released at the moments in which systemic control is curtailed, during crises. It is this process that Habermas explains as commencing in his much touted but rarely understood *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, for it was at this point that crises in political orders brought about by economic revolution in England, and elsewhere, opened up public spheres in which the political system was radically challenged.

For Habermas, bureaucratic capitalism colonises the lifeworld of ordinary people to the extent that the latter loses control over its environment (which becomes an instrument of state and capital). In the process, the very means of understanding and expression outside the language of instrumental rationality become marginalised. The 'steering media' of money and power 'encode a purposive rational attitude ... and make it possible to exert generalised strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented communication ... the lifeworld is no longer needed for the coordination of action' (Habermas, 1987: 183). In the political domain, a fake public sphere is used by the state to legitimise decision-making, so that 'discussion ... becomes formalised; the presentation of positions and counter positions is bound to contained pre-arranged rules of the game' (Habermas, 1989: 164). For decisions to be legitimised the state thus has to 'maintain the institutionalised fiction of a public opinion' (1989: 236), in which the 'criteria of rationality are completely lacking in a consensus created by sophisticated opinion-moulding services under the aegis of a sham public interest' (1989: 214–215). This being the case, human wellbeing is understood as the wellbeing of the capitalist economy, and democracy is understood as the management of the public. Thus arise economic management and propaganda and public relations to control these two respective domains.

Within this theoretical framework, we now move to consider the political and economic context of the 2010 CSR – that is, a *systemic crisis* that threatened to significantly challenge political and economic taken-for-granted. Following Habermas, we argue that during systemic crises, oppositional public spheres are more likely to emerge and thrive. In this case, the economic policies of the coalition government were met with a diverse anti-cuts movement, spearheaded and facilitated by trade unions, feminist groups, student protests, economists and disability groups, as well as campaign groups such as Coalition of Resistance, False Economy, 38 Degrees, and many others. In this context of a strengthening civil society and the articulation of radical alternatives to the coalition's and the Labour party's (substantially similar) economic policies, we argue that the news media's coverage ought to have reflected this 'shaking' of the status quo, especially given the 2009 'Parliamentary Expenses Scandal'. Taken together, we argue, these crises presented an opportunity for mainstream media – in their capacity as a forum for democratic debate – to provide a critical analysis of the very *systems* from which the crises

emerged. At a time when Britain's particular systems of advanced capitalism and parliamentary democracy are in crisis, it follows that the media's coverage ought to put under scrutiny the systems themselves. We are not seeking to arrive at a definitive explanation of the economic crisis, for it is precisely the point that there is no fixed account. Economics, like politics, is inescapably ideological; there are competing epistemological frameworks through which it is understood.

## The political and economic context

The United Kingdom has the sixth largest economy in the world, but some of the highest rates of income inequality among developed nations. The 2010 National Equality Panel report found that in the UK, the richest 10 per cent of the population are one hundred times richer than the poorest 10 per cent (Government Equalities Office, 2010). A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010) showed how Britain had the strongest link between an individual's earnings and that of their parents of any other western country; in other words, social mobility is very poor in Britain. There is £9 trillion of private wealth in Great Britain (Office for National Statistics, 2009). The richest 10 per cent of the population owns £4 trillion of this wealth (Glasgow University Media Group, 2010).

In May 2010, two years after the crisis hit the UK, the Conservative-Liberal government came to power. After an inconclusive electoral result, in which no one party won the mandate to govern, five days of negotiations followed between the Liberal Democrats, with Labour and the Conservatives respectively. Under their leader Nick Clegg, the Lib Dems chose to form a coalition government with David Cameron's Conservative party. The coalition published an initial policy document, touted as the 'Coalition Agreement' on 12 May, in which they set out all the policy areas on which they agreed. The first 'agreement' between the parties was stipulated as 'Deficit Reduction' (Conservative Party, 2010a):

The parties agree that deficit reduction and continuing to ensure economic recovery is the most urgent issue facing Britain. We have therefore agreed that there will need to be ... a significantly accelerated reduction in the structural deficit over the course of a Parliament, with the main burden of deficit reduction borne by reduced spending rather than increased taxes.

The second agreement between the parties was that 'a full Spending Review should be held, reporting this Autumn, following a fully consultative process involving all tiers of government and the private sector'. The CSR was delivered on 20 October, following an Emergency Budget in June. The cuts to public investment – and the scale of those cuts – were not, therefore, unexpected when they were announced in October. However, as we shall see, the cuts were constructed by the BBC as 'inevitable' in a much broader and deeply ideological sense, one dependent on the exclusion of political and economic alternatives.

## Method

Frame analysis has been employed as an analytical tool in a wide range of media studies. For example, Ashley and Olson (1998) use this approach in their analysis of print media's

framing of the US women's movement; Cooper (2002) analyses the relationship between media framing and social movement mobilisation; and Andsager (2000) analyses interest groups and their attempts to influence news frames. Whilst Entman has described framing as a 'fractured paradigm' (1993), his formulation of the four functions of framing has proved enormously influential within this field:

*Frames ... define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes – identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects.* (1993: 2, original emphasis)

Following an analysis of the government's Spending Challenge, we apply Entman's frame analysis to three online BBC news features covering the CSR: 'What would you cut?', 'What is the Spending Review?' and 'What would you cut and what would you save?' Incorporating a Habermasian critique of technical rationality into our frame analysis, our specific concerns are:

- 1 Whether the economic 'problem' was framed as technical or political in nature.
- 2 How the debate around the CSR was framed; which political responses were legitimised by their inclusion in the debate and which were not.
- 3 How citizens were engaged; what questions they were asked; and how their power to influence or change policy was framed.
- 4 How the framing of the CSR differed (or not) between the government and the BBC.

## Findings

### *Government framing: The Comprehensive Spending Review and the Spending Challenge*

In 2010, the government's Spending Challenge website was promoted as a forum to engage citizens in the democratic processes of policy formation. It was billed as a consultation, in which citizens, and particularly public sector workers, were encouraged to 'share ideas to cut the deficit and eliminate waste' (HM Treasury, 2010). David Cameron referred to it in these terms: 'There's enormous civic spirit in this country where people want to take control and do things in a different way' (cited in Mulholland, 2010). Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook founder, whose social networking site provided an additional forum for this initiative, agreed: 'It's really innovative to open up policy making and engage the public in this way to try and create more social change' (in Mulholland, 2010).

The first 'consultation' with public sector workers had apparently resulted in 63,000 suggestions, of which 35,000 were described as 'compliant' (HM Treasury, 2010, our emphasis). A second 'consultation' with the wider public resulted in 48,000 suggestions – those that were 'compliant' were published and subjected to ranking by other users. This 'consultative' process was claimed to have contributed to the decision to 'reform' the Educational Maintenance Allowance (Mulholland, 2010), among other cuts. The

CSR, then, was framed as a democratic exercise in which ‘reasonable’ (‘compliant’) members of the public sector workforce participated consensually, readily, and with tangible democratic effect.

However, civic participation in policy making was here possible only in exceptionally narrow terms; the possibility of influencing government decision-making was only realisable when it was ‘compliant’ – i.e. when it fitted with the pre-established narrative of the need for severe cuts, as in Habermas’s ‘pre-arranged rules of the game’. The public was invited to send in ideas to ‘help us get more for less’ (HM Treasury, 2010); other possibilities – such as gathering ideas to help the government get more tax from the rich – simply could not gain traction within this discursive framework, no matter how persuasive the proposal.

The government hailed the consultation period a success, stating that ‘this has been the most collaborative Spending Review ever with an extended period of engagement over the summer between Government, experts, the public sector and the general public’ (HM Treasury, 2010).

However, the Spending Challenge was something of a public relations disaster. The website had been inundated with racist and xenophobic comments, along with calls to reinstate capital punishment. The propagandistic nature of the Spending Challenge was clear. More problematic, we suggest, was the way in which the news media reproduced, reinforced and amplified this discourse of citizen ‘choice’ – that is, its framing was substantially similar to the government’s in important and problematic ways.

### *The BBC’s framing*

Here we closely analyse the framing in three online feature articles that formed part of the BBC’s special ‘season’ on the CSR. They are considered in chronological order of their publication. The features were chosen for the ways in which they seek to engage and represent citizens: the first is an ‘interactive’ feature that invited its audience to make ‘decisions’ about the economy; the second provided contextual information about the CSR and sought to act as a ‘guide’ for the citizen, providing simple and ‘impartial’ information in order to make the jargon and economic complexity of the CSR comprehensible to ordinary people; and the third sought to represent a range of different citizen voices responding to the CSR, and so to capture public opinion.

*What would you cut?* A feature entitled ‘What would you cut?’ (BBC, 2010a), hereafter ‘Feature 1’, invited the audience to choose which government department budgets they would cut, and by how much. This feature was in the ‘Business’ section of the BBC news webpages. Using a sliding scale, users could ‘decide’ whether to cut a department’s budget (for example, defence, housing, welfare) and by how much.

The maximum possible to cut from each budget was 30 per cent. The ‘consequences’ of each decision taken were shown; for example, if you ‘trim[med]’ the housing budget by 25 per cent, you were informed that this is the equivalent of 115,700 fewer affordable houses being built. Simple graphics were used to symbolise each budget – a piggy bank was used to illustrate the ‘Welfare’ budget, and so on. Significantly, this feature was published in June 2010, nearly four months before the CSR in October. It was part of the



BBC's Emergency Budget coverage rather than its CSR coverage but it explicitly anticipated the review that was to come later that year.

The fact that it was published a significant period of time before the CSR has particular implications. Aditya Chakraborty (2010), economics lead-writer for *The Guardian*, described the BBC's coverage as a 'six-week long series of programmes softening up the public for [Cameron's] government's spending cuts'. By running this feature in June it arguably functioned to "prime" audiences for the inevitability of cuts, and, by extension, implied that citizens lacked any power to change the government's course.

Users were given advice as to how to use the feature:

The June 2010 Budget said that departmental spending would have to be cut by £50bn a year by 2014–15, compared with 2010–11 levels. See if you can make those cuts in the deficit by using the sliders below to trim spending in various departments ... Concentrate on 'amount saved' to meet the target and try to reach £50bn. (BBC, 2010a)

The instruction to 'concentrate' and to 'try to reach £50bn' implies that the task is challenging in the same way that a brain-teaser puzzle is – requiring technical skill but not any engagement with questions pertaining to politics and democracy.

The only tax – as opposed to budget cut – included in Feature 1 was VAT (widely accepted as being the most regressive form of taxation). Users were invited to set VAT at between 17.5 per cent and 30 per cent (which, significantly, does not allow for setting it *below* what was the current rate of 17.5%).

The BBC News Twitter account (@BBCNews) alerted people to this feature by inviting them to 'Cut the deficit from the comfort of your computer' and providing a link to it. A link to the feature from the BBC's main webpage of the 2010 Emergency Budget coverage is entitled 'I, Chancellor' (BBC, 2010b). In this regard the feature is *itself* framed as an opportunity to exercise power, but of a specific and highly constrained type: that of the individualised consumer, choosing options from a limited, pre-defined selection.

Responses to this feature from the conservative media reproduced the notion that the BBC is a left-wing propaganda machine. Such arguments about whether the BBC is "biased" in favour of either Labour or the Conservatives are not useful, largely because they assume that there is a substantial difference between the parties on economic policy. Similarly, an analysis of whether the cuts are framed as either "positive" or "negative" does not take us very far. On a simplistic reading, the BBC's CSR coverage emphasises that the cuts will be "painful", and this might therefore be taken as a "negative" representation of the government's strategy. However, this corresponds with the oft-repeated government rhetoric that the cuts are "painful but necessary". The question of *where* cuts should fall (rather than "whether") is presented as *the* debate – closing down the space beyond the status quo that provides Adorno's 'possibility and potentiality' of alternatives.

*What is the Spending Review?* The second feature for analysis, entitled 'What is the Spending Review', was an embedded slideshow (BBC, 2010c), hereafter referred to as 'Feature 2'. It claimed to be a 'guide' to the Spending Review, and to explain to us 'why it

matters'. It was published on 12 October, just over a week before the CSR. A link to the feature appeared on the 'Background' section of the main Spending Review Special Report webpage, signalling that its main function was to provide contextual information. As with the previous feature, the piece appears under the red BBC banner of NEWS: BUSINESS.

The title slide was headed 'Scaling back spending'. The title slide depicted a set of old-fashioned weighing scales under the title text. The subtitle read: 'Follow this guide to find out more about the Spending Review and why it matters.' The image and the idea of scales have particular and powerful connotations, implying fairness, balance, impartiality and justice. This is of particular interest here, especially in light of reports that the BBC was pressured by the government into dropping a giant scissors logo from its CSR coverage (discussed later). If a pair of scissors was considered to be excessively politicised by the incumbent government, then the values connoted by the image of scales would perhaps have been welcomed.

The second slide, again featuring the image of scales, read: 'The financial crisis reduced the amount the government made in taxes and increased spending on things like bail-outs and benefits.' This assumes that a 'bail-out' of the banks was an *inevitable* response to the crash, when rather it was a *political* choice (interestingly, the banks are not explicitly named here, but we can safely assume that the bail-out refers to them). It was the 'financial crisis' that 'increased spending on things like bail-outs', rather than the government making a political intervention to save the system.

The shared treatment of banking bail-outs with welfare benefits in Feature 2 is of interest, especially when the government's handling of each was so markedly different; the banks were rescued by public money, whilst it became clear very quickly that welfare budgets were set to be reduced. However, this framing of banks and welfare recipients in terms of public expenditure paints them as something like equals. In March 2010, the total outstanding support explicitly pledged to the banks by the Treasury was £612.58 billion (National Audit Office, 2011). Welfare spending at that time stood at around £87 billion over a year.

Both the third and fourth slides repeated the image of scales as a frame within which to consider that: 'In the June Budget, the Chancellor said how he planned to raise more money through taxes' and that now he would now 'announce how he plans to reduce spending in the Spending Review'.

Feature 2 then went on to speculate how much each department's budget might be cut, illustrated with simple graphics. The tenth and final slide considered possible alternatives to this government policy – or rather, one alternative: 'The opposition would prefer to raise taxes more and cut spending less. They are worried cutting too soon might trigger another recession.' At this point, the Labour party was committed to a ratio of about 67 per cent cuts to 33 per cent tax rises; the policy position taken by the Labour party did not present a significant 'alternative' to the cuts agenda, but rather a moderated endorsement of it. However, here it was posited as *the* alternative.

*What would you cut and what would you save?* The third feature (BBC, 2010d) was published on 15 October, hereafter referred to as 'Feature 3'. A video montage contained 27 vox pops, all less than one minute long, some as short as 16 seconds, filmed and

submitted directly by BBC website users as well as gathered by BBC journalists. Each video was a response to the title question: 'What would you save and cut?'

Little introduction is given for the videos beyond the posing of the question. The question is thus assumed to be transparent, legitimate and immediately comprehensible, whereas we suggest that it is framed in such a way as to encourage certain responses and to powerfully discourage alternatives. The question precludes consideration of alternatives such as increased taxes for the wealthy or an examination of the nature of deregulated capitalism itself. Addressed to atomised individuals and to *individual preferences and interests*, it removes the possibility of communicative rationality and deliberation. 'Public opinion', then, becomes merely an aggregation of these interests and preferences, rather than a consensus arrived at through collective will-formation.

Titles of some vox pops include:

'I'd tackle the scroungers'

'I would tackle the issue of teen mums'

'No cutbacks, that's what we want' (significantly, no alternative solution is offered)

'I wouldn't cut library services'

'I don't agree with cuts for the disabled'

'Benefit cuts really worry me'

'I wouldn't cut child benefit'

'We must ensure value for money'

'CCTV cameras are a waste of time'

'Stop turning schools into academies'

'An awful lot of money has been wasted'

In the videos, there are many criticisms of government policies. However, even those that disagree with government cuts – many are opposed to one cut or another – do not draw on the alternative idea that the cuts might not be necessary at all. There is only one vox pop in which a genuine alternative is mentioned: the 23rd contribution states that 'Rich people should be taxed more'. For only one suggestion in 27 to include this possibility indicates the power of neoliberal hegemony. The BBC has here constructed a space in which neoliberalism is normalised not necessarily as *desirable*, but certainly as *inevitable*.

### *Findings: Frames used in the coverage*

To address the four functions of frames proposed by Entman, we suggest that the BBC's CSR coverage:

- 1 Defined the problem of the economic crisis as being technical, rather than political, in nature.

- 2 Diagnosed the problem as a “debt crisis” rather than a “crisis of capitalism”. This is not to suggest that the reverse should have been the case – but rather the *contested nature* of its very definition should have been explicitly foregrounded.
- 3 Compartmentalised social, political and economic problems and removed the moral—ethical dimension, so that the only ‘moral’ dimension discernable was the wellbeing of capitalism.
- 4 Suggested a technical remedy to the technical “problem”, thereby excluding the possibility of addressing the system of deregulated financial markets and neoliberal governance.

We suggest, therefore, that news media are part of a communicative structure that steers people not only in terms of ‘what to think about’ and ‘what to think’, but also *how to think* (cf. Habermas, 1987; Marcuse, 1964). As such, the news media’s framing of ‘problems’ as being technical (rather than political) in nature seeks to mobilise a technically oriented response in the citizen-audience. The dominance of technocratic approaches to ‘problems’ radically limits the extent to which problems can be understood and tackled, as well as delimiting the proper role of citizens in decision-making.

### *Explaining relations: The BBC and the state*

There have been numerous examples in the BBC’s history of high-profile challenges by successive governments against “controversial” editorial decisions. A dedicated BBC webpage entitled ‘The BBC and Government’ (BBC, 2011b) lists such incidences, with relevant archive footage provided: ‘From the General Strike in 1926 to the Hutton Inquiry in 2003–4, the history of the BBC is littered with rows over editorial policy and standards that made headline news.’ Links are provided to detailed descriptions of 14 such episodes. The feature seeks to frame the relationship between the BBC and the state as adversarial, thus emphasising the BBC’s journalistic integrity and independence.

Many journalists and writers – mostly in the right-wing press but also some elite BBC journalists – have claimed that the BBC is, or historically has been, structurally biased to the left and staffed overwhelmingly by leftist journalists (e.g. Marr, 2004; Sissons, 2011; Thompson cited in interview with Macintyre, 2010). On the other hand, Mehdi Hasan (2009), political editor at the *New Statesman*, argues that ‘from top to bottom, in structure and staffing, in history and ideology, [the BBC] is a conservative organisation, committed to upholding Establishment values and protecting them from challenge’. In terms of its reporting of economics, Daniel Dorling in his book *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, argues that ‘the BBC ... is an example of an institution that, for all its “balance”, subtly promotes greed as good through the style of its economic coverage’ (2010: 210). Greg Dyke, the former Director-General of the BBC, has suggested that the BBC helps maintain an unequal political system by being part of a ‘Westminster conspiracy. They don’t want anything to change. It’s not in their interests’ (cited in Wheeler, 2009).

Following Billig (1995) and Salter and Weltman (2012), we argue that as an institution, the BBC is ingrained into the cultural fabric of the British state and is structured through the constitutional framework of liberal capitalism, and a class-based liberal nationalism upon which the former rests. During the General Strike of 1926, John Reith,

the then Director-General of the BBC, announced: ‘Assuming the BBC is for the people, and that the government is for the people, then the BBC must be for the government in this crisis’ (in Williams, 1998: 100). Again, during the strikes of the 1970s, the BBC showed its understanding of the ‘national interest’:

No obligation of impartiality could absolve the broadcasting services from exercising their editorial judgement ... within the context of the values and objectives of the society they are there to serve. The BBC have as trustees for the public to judge not only what is best in news terms, but what is in the national interest. (cited in Garnham, 1978: 19)

The implication in both cases is that the interests of different institutions, groups and classes are subsumed and aligned in the ‘national interest’. The discourse of “putting aside differences” and submitting to “universally” held ‘values and objectives’ in order to resolve a crisis assumes that an outcome is possible that serves the *whole of society* best. It is this discourse that connects with the government’s pronouncement in 2010 that ‘we are all in this together’ (cited by Conservative Party, 2010b). This obscures the radically divergent interests that different groups *necessarily* have in a country as materially unequal as the UK.

In turn, the BBC’s online coverage of the CSR reproduced in important ways the assumption of a “consensus” which was, in fact, predicated on the marginalisation of alternatives. These alternatives *do* have powerful and persuasive academic and activist voices to speak upon their behalf. However, because they exist outside of the “centre-ground” – which is not *reflected* by parliamentary politics and mainstream media but rather *constructed* by them – these voices are marked as ‘extremist’ or ‘hardline’ when they are permitted to speak within the official public sphere.

The BBC’s editorial guidelines state that:

There are some issues which may seem to be without controversy, appearing to be backed by a broad or even unanimous consensus of opinion. Nevertheless, they may present a significant risk to the BBC’s impartiality. In such cases, we should continue to report where the consensus lies and give it due weight. However, even if it may be neither necessary nor appropriate to seek out voices of opposition, our reporting should resist the temptation to use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact or self-evident. (BBC, 2011a)

We contend that in this instance, the ‘received wisdom’ of *free market capitalism as inevitable* was reproduced as ‘self-evident’. The ‘voices of opposition’ included in the BBC’s coverage did more to affirm the economic ‘consensus’ than to problematise it.

The editorial guidelines additionally read: ‘Due impartiality is often more than a simple matter of “balance” between opposing viewpoints. Equally, it does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles’ (BBC, 2011c). The ‘fundamental democratic principles’ are here assumed to be self-evident and non-negotiable – they are the “common sense” that is nowhere offered up for scrutiny. It is this assumption that a legitimate or inarguable “consensus” exists, or that certain principles are devoid of ideology, which we seek to problematise.

Specific instances of government pressure on the BBC in its coverage of the CSR were reported in the national press. In September 2010 *The Guardian* reported that Mark Thompson, the Director-General of the BBC:

... was photographed carrying an internal email from Helen Boaden, the BBC News director, saying that she had had lunch with Andy Coulson, the coalition government's director of communications, at which he had expressed concern 'that we give context to our Spending Review Season'. (Deans, 2010)

Additionally, *The Telegraph* reported that, on finding out that the BBC were planning to use an image of a giant pair of scissors in its CSR coverage, the government pressured the corporation into dispensing with the idea – and the BBC capitulated (Blake, 2010). The decision to scrap the scissors logo, it was reported, was taken on the same day that Boaden had lunched with Coulson.

Clearly the BBC's coverage of the CSR was not defined straightforwardly according to government diktat. Whilst there were clearly sustained government attempts to manipulate the nature of CSR coverage, the successes of these interventions were only made possible by the wider discursive context in which particular ideas about politics and the economy have become hegemonic. The broader cultural and political normalisation of neoliberalism makes this particular kind of coverage seem commonsensical; but the BBC also participates in this *ongoing process* of normalisation. In its coverage of the CSR and the crisis more generally, the BBC, we submit, did not fulfil its duty to act impartially between competing policy options, and to furnish citizens with a range of views, ideas, facts and policies that could form the basis of democratic will-formation in a public sphere.

### *The BBC's intentions for its coverage*

In a BBC editorial blog, Mark Byford (2010) set out the intention of the BBC Spending Review season:

During critical times such as now, for the United Kingdom, the BBC has an important role to play to clarify the issues for our audiences – to help them make sense of different ideas and points of view. The Spending Review is one of those times and our aim is to provide insightful, objective programmes and expert analysis to help people understand the context and the potential options. We'll look at where and at what level the cuts may be made and why they are happening now, ask what the key issues are, how the Government is dealing with them and what the implications of the cuts are.

The BBC's College of Journalism website – 'a learning site for BBC journalists, by BBC journalists' (BBC, 2011d) – provides some specific guidance for journalists reporting the CSR. Kevin Marsh (2010) posted a blog in November 2010 with an embedded video briefing on 'Opinion and the Spending Review'. Introducing the video briefing, Marsh wrote that 'the public's view is that the deficit should come down', but that 'the electorate is split. Reduce the deficit slowly, or go for quick, deep cuts? Which areas should be exempt? And do people think the cuts will be fair?'

The video briefing – intended for BBC journalists – was presented by David Cowling (2010), the BBC’s editor of Political Research. In one clip entitled ‘Reporting Division’, Cowling repeats the idea that the public is unanimous in its desire to reduce the deficit, but that division exists on how best to do this:

There is the Government way, and, if you like, the Opposition way, and the country’s *split down the middle*. And I think we have the responsibility of *reflecting the British public* in both those aspects: they want the thing done, they’re not sure about how fast it should be done ... a lot of them want services preserved. (emphasis added)

The ‘public’ are here understood to be a perfect mirror of parliamentary politics, finding expression of their political convictions in the ‘choice’ between the coalition government’s and the Labour party’s economic policies. Three problems should be flagged up here. First, the idea that the public is ‘split down the middle’ is not merely a simplification, but a distortion, of politics. It ignores the articulation of an active anti-cuts agenda; it legitimises only two positions and expels others from the official public sphere. ‘Politics’ is reduced to (what is an already reductive version of) ‘parliamentary politics’; the structural constraints of that particular system are naturalised and accepted as actually and unproblematically representative of the electorate. Second, the claim that this ‘split’ in public opinion constitutes a profound disagreement over policy is misleading, in the obvious sense that it marginalises those positions that take a more substantially different position. Cross-bench peer Robert Skidelsky (2011) points out that the:

... [former Chancellor of the Exchequer in the previous Labour government] Darling’s last budget, in March 2010, aimed to halve the structural deficit by 2013–2014 in a series of yearly steps. In practice, George Osborne’s commitment in his first budget to eliminate it entirely by 2014–2015 was not much different, except for the relish with which it was undertaken.

As such, the ‘official’ debate was constructed around two positions, both of which were predicated upon a shared neoliberal assumption: the point of difference became whether cuts to public services chimed gleefully with your existing political position or whether you saw them as painful but inevitable. Third, the maxim of ‘what the people think’ requires critical attention – on what basis did the people think this? If the media had collectively failed to provide a debate in which alternatives were properly included and addressed, then ‘what the public think’ is necessarily compromised, ill-informed and politically dubious. That being so, ‘public opinion’ should not be something to be treated reverentially as a democratic ‘voice of the people’, but rather as a manipulable construct requiring critical analysis.

Whilst the CSR coverage had its own dedicated section on the BBC website, many features were also published on the ‘Business’ section of the website, within which ‘Economy’ was a subsection. By offering news on the economy through the prism of ‘business’, the political dimensions of the economic sphere are displaced. Citizens’ power is thus not only reduced; within the discourse of business, citizen engagement is not even *appropriate*. As Croteau and Hoynes (2000: 169) argue: ‘By equating economic health with the fortunes of investors, news tips its ideological hand. Such definitions fail



to recognise that different groups of people can have different economic interests.’ That is to say, the economic interests of most citizens as workers or recipients of welfare are precisely at odds with the interests of investors, whose interests equate to ‘Business’.

### *Framing citizens: How the ‘public’ was engaged*

The extent to which audiences are engaged in, by and through news discourse has been of interest to many scholars within the study of journalism, public communication and media. Specific attention has been paid to whether news discourse positions people as ‘citizens’ or ‘consumers’, and the implications for democratic participation that these positionings necessarily entail. For example, Lewis (2006: 160) has argued that whilst ‘citizens’ are frequently referred to in news discourse, generally ‘they do not propose, initiate, debate or engage’ and as such the possibility of them exercising any *actual* power is severely constrained. We argue that these BBC features, whilst superficially ‘engaging’ with citizens, provided a model for political participation that was structured according to the logic of consumerism. The emphasis on ‘choice’ and ‘interactivity’ was fetishised at the same time as the possibility of more radical alternatives was hidden from view.

The particular configurations of the BBC’s ‘interactive’ services here *constrained* choices, admitting only those that, much like the categorisation of submissions to the government’s Spending Challenge, were ‘compliant’ or ‘non-compliant’. The public’s role here was necessarily reactive and after-the-fact; they *responded* to policy rather than *helped formulate* it. Their response was taken as evidence of democratic vigour, whereas really it was an obfuscation of its lack.

This constraint on thinking reflects Marcuse’s concerns for modern society expressed in *One-Dimensional Man*. For Marcuse (1964: 1–3):

Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function ... Such a society may justly demand acceptance of its principles and institutions, and reduce the opposition to the discussion and promotion of alternative policies within the status quo.

This one-dimensionality is totalitarian as an ‘economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole.’ Ultimately, the ‘more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation’ (Marcuse, 1964: 6). At the same time, the greater the threat to this system, the more carefully and thoroughly that administration is undertaken.

At a moment when the systemic flaws of neoliberalism are exposed, its representation within the media and political mainstream as unassailable and inevitable seems increasingly assured. A reading of the BBC’s coverage in this respect perhaps suggests a deep anxiety about the potential collapse of neoliberal hegemony. It also hints at the power of counterpublics to influence debate, even if this influence is reflected negatively through



their exclusion, and only identifiable through the redoubling of efforts to normalise neo-liberalism against the backdrop of its crisis.

Whilst Feature 3 did contain individual instances of resistance to government cuts, this was only with regard to individual budget cuts, rather than to the broader principle of cutting back the welfare state. The effect was therefore to divide and individualise resistance. Moreover, it pitted groups *against* one another – pleading their case for the “scarce” resource of funding – whilst framing resistance as either self-interested or narrowly conceived.

Crucially, the discursive atomisation of individuals here also prevented the possibility of another process occurring. Deliberation within a properly functioning public sphere can lead to citizens changing their preferences and positions in the light of new evidence and arguments; but it can also lead to the raising of consciousness around shared interests. This possibility was conspicuously absent here.

Rather than an ‘impartial’ capturing of public opinion, this amounts to the construction of a fake public sphere, in which the ‘criteria of rationality are completely lacking in a consensus created by sophisticated opinion-moulding services under the aegis of a sham public interest’ (Habermas, 1989: 214–215).

## Conclusion

There is no quick fix to the problems articulated here. The BBC cannot change this misrepresentation, as they tried in response to the Glasgow Media Group’s research into their reporting on Palestine and Israel (Philo and Berry, 2004), by merely adding a paragraph for “context”. In both cases, the problems are structural. In the case of the CSR, the problems have to do not least with the division of the newsroom so that economics has become a special interest section – economics affects business rather than people, despite the significance of the Greek origins of the term. Thus “economics”, understood as “business” is relevant to business people only, and is articulated only in the systemic, and one may say inhumane, language of their world. It is this ideological underpinning of the BBC’s reporting that creates the most significant barrier to adequate reporting.

We have shown how the BBC substantially reproduced the government’s neoliberal economic arguments in the case of the CSR. This process of reproduction has been three-fold, made possible by specific instances of government pressure; the ongoing vulnerability of the BBC in respect of the state; and, perhaps most importantly, by the broader mainstream media and political context in which neoliberalism is conflated with economic ‘common sense’.

We do not wish to argue that the BBC’s coverage of the CSR is directly and perfectly equated with the peddling of government propaganda. Certainly there was an attempt at “balance” in a way that was absent from the Spending Challenge. Thus, whilst the BBC’s coverage did include instances of resistance, opposition and contradiction, we argue that the overriding frame was that *cuts to public spending/investment are inevitable and necessary*. Consequently, the question of whether the cuts were framed as either “positive” or “negative” becomes marginal.

Debates on other BBC platforms, particularly live television and radio debates, did have within them the potential to (at least partly) challenge the dominant framing of cuts,

even though, we suggest, they were mostly framed in substantially similar terms. The online platform is particularly interesting, however, as it outlives the ephemeral nature of live broadcast and can be used more readily as a resource for education and learning.

It is important to note that the BBC was not alone in its normalisation of neoliberalism in this context. There was predictable legitimisation of the CSR from the right-wing daily press. Even *The Guardian* (2010), an ostensibly left-liberal newspaper, had an online feature entitled ‘Comprehensive Spending Review: You make the cuts’. Most other corporate media, including Channel 4, provided similar features. The BBC was thus operating within a wider media and political context in which the inevitability of cuts to public investment was continuously constructed and reaffirmed.

It must also be noted that the government framing of cuts has clearly been rejected by many citizens, as apparent in student and public sector strikes and protests (including some of the biggest demonstrations the UK has ever seen). We argue that a properly functioning public sphere would incorporate the radical debates that *were* taking place – not just in the sense that they would be mentioned (which they were), but in the sense that they would be properly engaged, tested and debated.

The problem that we identify with the BBC’s coverage is not that it represents the CSR in the “wrong” way, but that it assumes that there is *one right way*. We submit that the coverage of the CSR represents a continuation of BBC political and economic journalism’s collusive relationship with the state. We suggest that the BBC must stand firm in the face of pressure from the state, but it must also break down barriers between its news departments, and crucially seek out and communicate the knowledge and ideas of the groups and movements that offer analyses and responses beyond the bounds of the ideological order.

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## Author biographies

Jilly Boyce Kay is a PhD student at De Montfort University, Leicester. Jilly is researching a history of political discussion programmes on British television, with a specific interest in gender analysis.

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Her previous research includes a study of the UWE Occupation published in *Social Movement Studies* in 2011

Lee Salter is Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Sussex. He is the co-author of *Digital Journalism* and the writer of the documentary film *Secret City*. His research over the past few years has focused on mediations of the economic crisis and protests against it. His previous work has included analyses of reporting in Iraq and Venezuela as well as work on technology and politics and on the relations between journalism and PR.