

New challenges in the coverage of politics for UK broadcasters and regulators in the new 'Post-Truth' environment

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Challenges in the Coverage of Politics for UK Broadcasters and Regulators in the new ‘Post-Truth’ Environment

Ivor Gaber

Abstract

The notion of ‘the truth’ has always been highly problematic for political journalists – in a post-truth environment in particular, one person’s ‘truth’ is another person’s propaganda, or fake news. The last two years have been a turbulent time for British broadcasters in general and the BBC in particular, in terms of their coverage of the major political events in the UK. Their reporting of the general elections of 2015 and 2017, of the 2016 European Union Referendum and the 2015 election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party, have all, to some extent, been misleading (as was the case with the press and online non-partisan media). The BBC, which is overwhelmingly the most used and most trusted source of news in the UK is a vital element in the UK public sphere and consequently its recent journalistic failures are particularly problematic. This brought into sharp focus struggles over the notion of ‘the truth’ as applied to the progress of recent election and referendum campaigns. The example used in this paper – about the issue of the Labour Party and antisemitism – illustrates the difficulties in arriving at a ‘truth’ in the less frenetic atmosphere between campaigns. It demonstrates how there can, legitimately, be many truths to one story; this, in itself, raises a number of urgent questions about the nature of political journalism in Britain today and hence poses major challenges for its public broadcasting system, which no doubt has implications that resonate far outside the UK.

Introduction

It is probably a default position for students of journalism to focus on the problems, rather than the successes, of the news media. Looking at broadcast news today one can point to its biggest single success - that despite the tsunami of news now available online and on social media - news on the public service broadcasters (PSBs), both radio and television, remains overwhelmingly the most used and most trusted sources of news in the UK (Reuters Institute 2017, 54 Ofcom 2017 73). So much for the good news, but there is a problem – and one that needs urgent fixing – and that relates to the fact that the broadcasting regulations which, to a large extent, are responsible for the continuing success of UK public service broadcasting, are now facing new a new challenge. This challenge faces all public service broadcasters, and an examination of how it has impacted on UK broadcasters, given their global standing, might be considered of relevance to broadcasters everywhere. Never more so than in a post-truth environment, when these issues take on a new urgency and the relevant regulations require re-consideration and re-framing. This article focuses on the BBC’s political coverage because the Corporation is consistently quoted as the most used

and most trusted source of news in the UK (Reuters 2017, 54, Ofcom 2017, 73); also because, in terms of UK politics, the past two years have seen a succession of reporting failures by the BBC (as well as much of the rest of the media) when it has been unable to provide its audience with an adequate and accurate account of current political developments. Four such are worth recounting.

First, during the 2015 UK General Election, with the polls suggesting that neither the Conservatives nor Labour would win an overall majority, the BBC focused largely on the issue of whether the Labour Party would seek to form a parliamentary pact with the Scottish Nationalist Party (Wring and Ward 2015 224). This issue (which, in the event proved to be totally irrelevant) consumed large amounts of air time at the expense of a discussion of real policy issues. Cushion and Sambrook concluded:

“So it’s clear that horse-race coverage and predictions of a hung parliament marginalised discussion of wider policy issues through the campaign. And extensive discussion of coalition deals and permutations may well have influenced how people voted.” (Cushion and Sambrook, 11)

Second, following Labour’s defeat in 2015 the party was plunged into a leadership election (as it was again a year later) and the broadcasters’ (particularly the BBC’s) coverage of the ultimate winner – Jeremy Corbyn – came in for severe criticism not just from Corbyn-supporters but from academic researchers as well (Media Reform Coalition 2016 & 2017 and Cammaerts et al 2016). Perhaps more surprisingly, there was also criticism from a number of broadcasters and executives including senior BBC editorial figures David Dimbleby and Nick Robinson, from a former Chair of the BBC Trust, Sir Michael Lyons and the former Editorial Director of the BBC Roger Mosey (Curran et al, 2018 Chapter 10). The thrust of the criticisms was that there had been a lack of fairness in the coverage of Corbyn, and a failure to detect the substantive levels of support for him among ordinary members of the Labour Party. As the BBC’s Political News Editor, Katy Searle, said: “... traditionally our focus here at BBC Westminster has been across the road - the House of Common and House of Lords - Jeremy has forced us to look beyond that.” (Searle 2016)

Third, during the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union, the broadcasters again came in for severe criticism– particularly the BBC– for applying a mechanistic notion of ‘balance’ between the Remain and Leave campaigns which gave what has been described as a ‘false equivalence’ (Sambrook 2016) between the factually based opinions of experts and the unsubstantiated rebuttals of politicians’. As Jay Blumler, long-term observer of British television’s coverage of politics, noted: “... the broadcasters; news coverage seemed to have been governed less by ‘due impartiality’ than by ‘impartiality carried to an extreme’! It was as if they considered that ‘every claim by or piece of evidence

for Remain [had to] be balanced by something from or for Leave' (Blumler, 11). Two of the most noteworthy examples of this from the BBC were, first, on the eve of polling 1,280 business leaders signed a letter to *The Times* backing UK membership of the EU. Within the headline the BBC 'balanced' the letter with a rebuttal from just one entrepreneur, Sir James Dyson; even though his support for Leave had already been broadcast 10 days before. Similarly, the BBC used Leave-supporting economist, Patrick Minford, on two separate occasions, to rebut both 10 Nobel-prize winning economists; and the IMF's forecasts about the dangers of Brexit (shorthand for the UK leaving the European Union).

Finally, the shortcomings of the broadcasters in the 2017 General Election were in part a continuation of their failure to earlier grasp the significance of Corbyn. They rigorously policed themselves about not being over-dependent on the opinion polls (as they had been in 2017), but in so doing they missed the big story – Corbyn's confounding of the predictions that he would haemorrhage Labour votes when in the event he gained them, as Cushion noted:

In live two-ways – which made up nearly a quarter of all TV news items – often political correspondents would cast doubt on Corbyn's ability to appeal to ordinary voters. And, in vox pops, where party political balance was constructed, Labour support was represented but Corbyn's credibility was often undermined. (Cushion 2017, 39)

Extreme Spin

None of these failings were the result of deliberate bias, but the consequence, in all cases, of a failure of the BBC to serve the public and deliver news about the election or referendum that met the standards laid down by the regulator: "...achieving the highest standards of due accuracy and impartiality and ... [striving] to avoid knowingly and materially misleading our audiences." (BBC Trust, Section 1.2). But life for the impartial broadcast journalist – and the regulators for that matter – is now far from straightforward. It has always been problematic, during elections in particular, to decide on 'the truth – i.e. what information should, and should not, be reported, or at least what information should be reported but only with added contextualisation, caveats or rebuttals; in the current environment this task has become ever more complex. For example, during the 2016 EU Referendum campaign the following statements were made by the two major campaigning organisations:

- Every week the UK sends £350 million to the EU
- Turkey will be joining the EU
- Brexit will leave every British family £4,300 worse off

All three statements could be described as 'extreme spin' - they contained a small element of

accurate information but were misleading. The opposite of a lie is the truth, so were they closer to the truth or lies? The answer perhaps depends on one's own view of the issues at stake, but the argument of this article is not that there is no such thing as the truth per se but that there are competing versions of the truth, made up of true statements but, in some cases, lacking adequate contextualising. Hence, to talk about 'the truth' can be misleading (concomitantly the notion of 'post-truth' is also problematic but that is not the focus of this discussion). The job of the journalist is, as Watergate journalist Carl Bernstein characterised it to seek "the best obtainable version of the truth" (Bernstein 2013). But how can regulators legislate, or regulate, such an imprecise notion, particularly in an age of fake news, post-truth and extreme spin? In the UK, the phenomenon of fake news has been, to date, relatively absent (Tait 239). However, that is not the case with 'extreme spin', which has been a growing feature of British political communications over the past two decades and begs a number of questions: when a journalist is presented with facts that he or she knows are wrong, or at best are grossly misleading, what course of action does he or she follow? Does s/he simply report the claims as straight news, unchallenged? Report them as contested claims, counter posing them either with fact-based refutations from their opponents or from a fact-checking organisation. Or does s/he simply refuse to report claims that he or she believes are deliberately misleading? There are no easy answers.

Equally 'extreme spin' creates great challenges for regulators as well. Under the current guidelines how do they react to allegations of bias when one side, or another, disputes the way they, or their campaign, is being reported? Do news broadcasters have a responsibility to report misleading, or even false, information because this is an election campaign and they have to meet their statutory obligations of impartiality? Certainly, if inaccurate information is broadcast during normal times, even if only in an interview, broadcasters can be subject to a complaint and required to broadcast a correction¹. Is it the same during an election? As yet, the regulators have yet to rule on this issue. Then there is the question, if in a campaign one side is continually making claims that a broadcaster concludes are false, does this group or party, consequently receive less coverage than they might otherwise be entitled to? And even if the broadcasters do decide to broadcast the claims, but insist on adding rebuttal or contextual material, could they be accused of not treating that particular party with due impartiality?

During the EU referendum campaign there was a view among some of the BBC's political staff that, at times, they were being required to increase the prominence being given to those campaigning for the UK to leave the EU. This came about because, for most of the campaign, they were seen by the journalists to have been putting out unsubstantiated assertions which

were not being reported. This led the BBC News management to become concerned that they were giving the Remain campaign too greater prominence. But this was problematic for reporters on the ground:

I felt that in the last weeks we were resetting the balance. I was told it was because Leave weren't giving us anything other than assertions. I was having to go back to Leave to say that your press releases are rubbish. I would ask them to harden up the stories. I remember whilst working on a Sunday night package being told that I had to have more Leave clips than Remain. I was delivering unbalanced packages possibly to compensate for some earlier imbalance. (BBC Reporter 2017)

Searching for the 'truth'

The cornerstone of broadcasting regulation is, as has been noted, due impartiality, defined by Ofcom (which now regulates all PSBs in Britain) as:

... not favouring one side over another. "Due" means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. So "due impartiality" does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented. (Ofcom, 29)

But is due impartiality now adequate to the task in these new political times when the very notion of what is true and what is not, has come to such prominence? Are not more robust and focussed definitions required? And do some of the much-cherished journalistic nostrums have to be jettisoned? In some ways broadcast journalists, and their regulators, have been ahead of the press in that three strongly held articles of faith of many a print journalist, the words 'objectivity', 'balance' and 'the truth' have long since been dispensed with. There has been much discussion, both in newsrooms and the academy, about the roles of 'objectivity' and 'balance' in journalism, but the limitations of both as cornerstones, have been clear for some time, and neither word appears in the broadcast regulators current guidelines (BBC Trust 2017 and Ofcom 2017B). However, even though 'truth' per se might have disappeared, deciphering 'the truth', has remained somewhat more problematic and is now one of the key challenges facing broadcasters and their regulators.

This notion of discovering 'the truth' as being the central mission of journalism was enshrined in the Editorial Guidelines of the BBC Trust (which governed the BBC until 2017). Its Accuracy clause stated that: "When necessary, all the relevant facts and information should also be weighed to get at the truth." (BBC Trust, Section 3.1) This is a very clear statement that the BBC, as a corporate body, accepted the notion that there was a 'truth' out there waiting to be revealed by a careful process of measurementⁱⁱ. But is there?

There are verifiable facts and there are statements that are true but is there such thing as 'the truth'. Harcup puts IT into a more rounded context when he writes:

Journalists aim to get as close to the truth as possible within the constraints under which they work and in as far as the facts of the matter under consideration are known to anyone. However, all the potential facts will be subjected to a process of selection and construction of news that is often said to simplify the messiness of reality into neat narratives. Also, exactly what the best obtainable

version of the truth is may change over time as more information becomes available and/or more sources speak out. Furthermore, what is regarded as being true may also depend on the background and predispositions of journalists, sources, and members of the audience.” (Harcup, 140)

Deliberate falsification in journalism is rare (although that is not to say that it never occurs); but arguments as to what are the most important elements of a particular event are not, and this is where the problem lies. For example, a reporter sent to cover a political gathering listens to perhaps an hour of speeches, followed by an hour of further contributions from the audience. What does he or she extract for a two-minute news package, or a 300-word story? Is it the main point the speaker is attempting to make? Or is it the central point of the speech as the journalist has ascertained it, which might well be different from the intention of the speaker? Or is it the line that s/he, and the other journalists covering the meeting, subsequently agree upon, or even, the line fed to the journalist by the speaker’s spin doctor before the speech had even begun?

One thing is sure, the members of the audience will be unlikely to agree with the journalist’s choice of lead. This is partly because we all tend to experience the same event slightly differently, even if all things are equal; but in the case of the political meeting all things are not equal. Supporters of the speaker will undoubtedly appraise the speech more enthusiastically than any reporter could or should, and opponents will undoubtedly take a more negative view. Then, what if there are other speakers at the meeting – are they to be totally ignored in order to ensure that the main speaker’s remarks get a prominent airing? And how about the contributions – heckles or questions - from the audience (if any), are they a part of the story? Of course, if the other speakers, or audience members, use the opportunity to attack the main speaker, or his or her party, then that might well provide an appropriate lead; and that brings us to the bigger question. No political reporter goes to a meeting just to hear a speaker per se. They go to hear what the speaker has to say about a particularly salient issue. Should the speaker use the occasion to re-state his or her party’s (or government’s) well-known position that might constitute a story, but not an important one; however, should the speaker attack his or her party, or colleagues, then that becomes ‘news’ and takes precedence over all else. In other words, there are many ways of reporting a political meeting – dependent on the framing - all true but none of them necessarily the ‘truth’.

One particular recent political story, relating to neither an election nor a referendum but to the highly emotional issue of allegations of antisemitism within the Labour Party, vividly demonstrates the problematic nature of ‘the truth’. In the spring of 2016 it was revealed that a new Labour Muslim MP had, two years earlier, shared a

Facebook posting that talked about ‘transporting’ Israel (and presumably only its Jewish population) to the USA. (Order-Order 2016). The MP, Naz Shah, represented a seat with a substantial Muslim population. Following the revelation Shah made a public apology that the *Guardian* described as “wholehearted” (Stewart et al 2016). She accepted that the post was anti- Semitic and said it did not now represent her views. She was forced to resign from her position in the parliamentary Labour Party



and was suspended from party membership.

Figure 1

So what has this preamble to do with the ‘truth’ and the question of regulation? There could be no doubting that Ms. Shah and had shared the Facebook page, but the ‘truth’ in this story was more complex. What was the truth about Ms. Shah’s Facebook postings? Some newspapers talked about her antisemitic post and others of her’ sharing’ such a post. This might sound like sophistry, but most Facebook users accept that there is a difference between originating a post and sharing something that someone else has originated – it’s the difference between an active, premeditated antisemitic outburst and a passive reactive one - a nod in agreement rather than shouting out of an abusive remark in public. To confuse matters further, not every news report made it clear that Ms Shah’s sharing had taken place before she had been elected to Parliament. Would it have made a difference to an audience as to whether Ms Shah was, or was not, an MP when she made, what she conceded was, her antisemitic comments? Whilst there is no excuse for such actions, either before or after entering Parliament, the image of an MP sharing such material is far more powerful than what was in fact the case, someone, who at that time was a member of the public.

Then there is the matter of context. Ms Shah represented a seat in, a city with a very large Muslim population. Had she been seen as a politician who was a particularly vocal spokesperson for the Palestinian cause (as was her predecessor, who declared the City an “Israel free zone”) then the sharing, even though she was not an MP at the time, would have made it more difficult for her to subsequently claim, as she did, that she represented all her constituents, irrespective of religious or other ethnic affiliations. But her claim was strengthened almost as soon as the revelations about her Facebook posting came to light when she was robustly defended by the leader of the city’s only synagogue who commended her work with the local Jewish community.

Thus, in this one story alone there are two broad versions of the truth, both of which would have passed the scrutiny of the most fastidious of fact-checkers. The first version is of a Muslim MP, representing a large Muslim community, using Facebook to call for the transportation of the Jews from Middle East to America; the second is of a young woman (admittedly with political ambitions) clicking on the share button of her Facebook page on a post that, on the face of it, appeared to be an ironic comment on the United States’ uncritical support of Israel at a time when Gaza was being bombed by Israeli planes. Which is ‘the truth’? Both are.

But there is another ‘truth’ to this story which requires discussion, and that is how Ms Shah’s comments might have been read by Jewish members of the Labour Party. Of course, even to attempt such a characterisation is doomed to failure in that there would probably be as many Jewish opinions on this matter as there are Jews in the Party. Nonetheless, it is still worth discussing how Ms Sha’s posting might have been interpreted by some, if not all, Jewish Labour supporters. First, the post was headlined “Solution to the Israel/Palestine Conflict”. It is a reasonable supposition, though admittedly unverifiable (because the anonymous post has now been deleted) that the originator gave little thought to the word ‘solution’. But to many Jews the word ‘solution’ will be forever associated with Hitler’s ‘final solution’. Much was made of the offence that this word could cause Jews, but is there a difference between such a word being used knowingly or just inadvertently? The second word that was potentially, and understandably, offensive came in the sentence “The transportation costs will be less than 3 years of defence spending.” As with the word ‘solution’ the word ‘transportation’ has highly emotive connotations for Jews, being redolent of the mass transportations that were used to send Jewish people to the Nazi gas chambers. But, as in the previous discussion, was the word “transportation” used deliberately in order to intensify the impact of the message, or inadvertently? In other words, this relatively simple story illustrates how one person’s truth is

another's misrepresentation; and it exemplifies the perils of making 'the truth' central to the notion of impartiality; it also raises a number of important questions for public service broadcasters and regulators.

What is to be done?

That the principle of 'due impartiality' should be retained is unarguable, but to make it efficacious it requires further refinement and restatement. This article does not represent a scholarly version of a latter-day Moses, coming down from a media Mount Sinai, clutching new tablets of impartiality. Instead it concludes by drawing attention to some proposals emerging from former and practising senior journalists in response to the new news environment. Richard Tait, a former senior editorial figure at both the BBC and ITN suggests:

The broadcasters need to know what they can do on air if faced with demonstrable falsehoods, what the regulator will do to support them if the source of the lie is a powerful politician or party and how far impartiality should take account of the credibility of claims and counter-claims. (Tait 239)

The former Controller of BBC Editorial Policy, Phil Harding, suggests putting fact-checking centre-stage, rather than largely confined to specialist programmes and websites:

To be effective fact-checking needs to be a daily part of the mainstream news team. In broadcasting it needs to be in the middle of the Ten O'clock News report, not just a script afterthought from the presenter. Fact-checking also needs to be bold and blunt and done in real time or as near instantaneous as possible. (Harding 325)

Whilst Channel Four News' Political Editor, Gary Gibbon, calls on his broadcasting colleagues to free themselves from their obsession with the popular press:

"... we should ration our obsession with the nation's newspapers. I've known a number of political broadcasters who, ahead of their own late evening bulletins, check in with high circulation newspapers like the Daily Mail and The Sun to know what their headlines are going to be the next morning." (Gibbon, 22)

And finally, Jay Blumler, who has been observing how British broadcasters have been covering politics for more than half a century, provides this sagacious summation:

"...there is a case for reconsidering (not jettisoning) the standing of the norm of impartiality in broadcast journalism, especially its supremely elevated role (as if a 'be-all' and 'end-all') in election campaign coverage. Perhaps it should be regarded more as a means than as an end of such coverage – the latter being to ensure that individual citizens, without being propagandised by some dominant viewpoint, are offered bases for making informed choices on issues that matter for themselves and society at large. (Blumler, 246)

In other words, if the BBC in particular, and public service broadcasting more widely, is to retain its position as the most used, and most trusted, source of news in an increasingly competitive and variegated news environment then journalists and regulators could do worse than adopt the motto of Don Maurizio Cabrera, in di Lampedusa's novel, *The Leopard*, who told villagers, fearful of the change that Il Risorgimento appeared to represent to their

traditional way of life that: “Everything must change so that everything can stay the same”
(di Lampedusa 29)

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¹² Order- Order

<http://order-order.com/2016/04/26/labour-mp-israelis-should-face-transportation-out-of-middle-east/>

ⁱ This was precisely one of the complaints that this author adjudicated upon when he was one of the BBC Trust's Independent Editorial Advisors.

ⁱⁱ The Ofcom Broadcasting Code is silent on the issue of 'the truth'