

3 THE PROBLEM OF BIAS IN THE BBC

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Introduction

The BBC is regularly accused of bias. Over the last decade, there has been sustained criticism of the BBC's coverage of Britain's membership of the EU.¹ Republicans complain that the BBC's coverage of the royal family is too deferential.² Independence campaigners in Scotland believe the BBC's referendum coverage was biased towards the union.³ On the Israel–Palestine conflict,⁴ immigration,⁵ National Health Service (NHS) reforms⁶ and American politics,⁷ the BBC has also been criticised. Some

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- 1 See extensive list of reports by News-watch: <http://news-watch.co.uk/monitoring-projects-and-reports/>
 - 2 See the website of Republic: <https://republic.org.uk/what-we-do/news-and-updates/bbc-accused-blocking-embarrassing-royal-stories>
 - 3 www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jun/02/bbc-scottish-independence-accused-pro-union-bias-good-morning-scotland-gary-robertson
 - 4 At various times, the BBC has been accused of being biased against Israel (www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2193845/Why-wont-BBC-come-clean-bias-Israel--moral-country-deserves-support.html) and in favour of Israel (www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hundreds-protest-against-bbc-proisrael-bias-of-gaza-coverage-in-cities-across-the-uk-9609016.html).
 - 5 www.migrationwatchuk.org/press-article/89
 - 6 www.newstatesman.com/blogs/broadcast/2012/10/pro-coalition-bias-bbcs-coverage-nhs-reforms
 - 7 www.spectator.co.uk/features/3276176/the-bbc-cant-help-loving-obama-just-as-it-cant-help-encouraging-recession/

even claim that there are systematic biases in its entertainment programming (Sewell 2012).

However, bias is difficult to measure, and it is, of course, a highly subjective issue. Judging bias requires an understanding of what 'unbiased' or 'neutral' might be. Furthermore, all organisations have inherent biases in the way they operate or present issues, even if they would like to think otherwise. It would, indeed, be surprising if this were not true of the BBC. In this context, it is worth noting that a number of prominent former and current BBC employees have suggested that the BBC 'world-view' exhibits a metropolitan liberal outlook with a bias towards the conventional wisdoms of this world-view. The presenter Andrew Marr, for example, has said the BBC is 'a publicly funded urban organisation with an abnormally large proportion of younger people, of people in ethnic minorities and almost certainly of gay people,' creating 'an innate liberal bias'.⁸ Peter Sissons has described a "mindset" ... a way of thinking firmly of the Left'.⁹ Rod Liddle, the former editor of the *Today* programme, has written on the BBC's coverage of the euro that 'the BBC's bias was arrived at through a sort of inherent wet liberalism, rather than an actual plot as such'.¹⁰ More recently, Roger Mosey, a former editorial director, suggested the BBC has a 'liberal-defensive' bias.¹¹

The counter to this is sometimes that the BBC exhibits a deep-rooted small 'c' conservatism when it comes to a range of issues such as constitutional coverage of the royal family and the armed forces. But, under an institutional explanation of bias, an innately liberal culture coupled with apparent conservatism on some issues is not directly contradictory. Both are consistent with the view that, institutionally, the BBC might reflect a soft

8 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6764779.stm>

9 www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1349506/Left-wing-bias-Its-written-BBCs-DNA-says-Peter-Sissons.html

10 <http://biasedbbc.org/blog/2011/09/24/rod-liddle-explains-bbc-pro-euro-bias/>

11 www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article4476635.ece

liberal or progressive but broadly establishment opinion. This hypothesis would suggest that the apparent conservatism on certain issues may mainly be reflective of the BBC's historical role as a national public service broadcaster as well as the selection bias of those who choose to work there given this knowledge.

Unsurprisingly, the BBC itself is extremely defensive about all of these 'accusations'. It seizes on reports that dismiss accusations of 'left-of-centre' bias and uses the fact that it gets criticised from left and right to robustly defend itself against charges of political or ideological favouritism. Yet, few suggest that the BBC is overtly and deliberately biased at all times, particularly towards or against a political party. It is more that an institutional world-view sometimes appears to shape coverage, whether through decisions on what to cover, what to include in a story or what to admit. Just because figures on the left and right sometimes moan about the effects of this world-view does not implicitly make the BBC 'neutral'.

Does bias matter?

Some acknowledge that bias of this kind might be inevitable in any media organisation. It is extremely difficult to provide news that can 'educate and inform' without making judgements that people interpret as 'slant'. Furthermore, some (such as Matthew Taylor from the Royal Society of Arts) believe that commercial news stations might exhibit their own biases, which tend to favour certain market-based viewpoints, meaning the existence of the BBC provides a necessary counterweight.

This is highly doubtful. The extensive, detailed work of Tim Groseclose on the US media market (a more commercial landscape) has comprehensively shown that, while there do exist some media organisations, such as Fox News, which exhibit conservative biases, the overwhelming majority of national news outlets tend to lean to the left in comparison with the views of

the general population (Groseclose 2012). He attributes this to the self-selection of journalists being more likely to be 'liberal' (in the American sense of the word) in the first place.

It is certainly not argued in this chapter that the BBC is likely to be more biased than other media organisations. There is no doubt about the difficulties inherent in producing unbiased news. However, there are four key reasons why bias might be particularly important in the context of talking about the future of the BBC.

The first is that the BBC's reputation for fair coverage is much stronger than that of other media organisations. Trust in the BBC is higher than in other media institutions, and it is the largest source of news in the UK. A poll by YouGov found that 31 per cent of the public believe that BBC journalists are most likely to tell the truth, compared with just 17 per cent for ITV news and 15 per cent for the 'upmarket' press.¹² Given the BBC's reach, and the trust placed in it, any biases could potentially have a much more significant impact on altering public understanding of an issue than biases arising on other media platforms.

There is evidence that media bias generally alters public opinion in the US in terms of how people vote (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; George and Waldfogel 2006; Gerber et al. 2009). The work of Knight and Chiang (2008) has also shown that the effects of newspaper endorsements are more effective in terms of influencing election results when they are unexpected. This implies that, if a news source has a reputation for bias, it is less able to change people's minds. Given that the biases of other media outlets (particularly newspapers) tend to be better known and more widely acknowledged than those of the BBC, we would expect the BBC to have a much bigger impact on public opinion than other news sources.

12 Yougov/London Press Club on Trust: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/ea1ioktxin/Results-for-Public-Trust-In-Institutions-24112014-W.pdf

Another reason why BBC bias is important is that, unlike its broadcast competitors and newspapers, the BBC is guaranteed its funds through a compulsory licence fee. Consumers are not able to punish the institution financially for perceived coverage bias. This puts it in a highly privileged position, one in which TV viewers are made to pay for the content, irrespective of their views on it.

In addition, the method through which the BBC is funded means that the organisation itself has a vested interest in the political process. It uses a chunk of its guaranteed revenues to lobby for the maintenance of the licence fee. If a government had a manifesto commitment to radically slash or abolish the BBC licence fee, the BBC's coverage of that issue could be vitally important in framing that debate. This is not a mere theoretical point – recently, Andrew Marr interviewed BBC Director General Lord (Tony) Hall on just this issue.¹³

Finally, the BBC has a very high proportion of news content. There would be legitimate competition concerns even if there were no concerns about bias. If it is accepted that any media organisation is likely to exhibit biases, then we should be concerned if there is considerable market power wielded by any news organisation, whether it is in the private or the public sector.

Absolute or relative bias?

Before seeking to measure bias, we first have to outline exactly what we mean by it. In particular, it is important to understand the distinction between *absolute* bias (defined here as a deviation in coverage from objective truth) and *relative* bias (a deviation from the position of another, whether that be public opinion, the views of politicians or some other metric). Absolute bias is difficult to assess, because many of the relevant issues will not relate to questions that are objective by nature.

¹³ www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-33215141

However, when it comes to relative bias, it is highly unlikely that any institution or news source will be totally unbiased. At some stage, editorial decisions must be made on what to cover, who to invite to speak on a subject and how to present the subject. We can assess relative bias more easily than absolute bias (see Groseclose 2012). Whether we are comparing the BBC's coverage with that of other media outlets, or with public opinion, or with some subjective view of what should be covered, there are techniques that can be used to assess what the BBC reports, how it reports things and what it omits.

The rest of this chapter examines case studies in order to assess the relative biases of the BBC. The case studies selected here are, of course, also likely to be reflective of the relative biases of the author. However, I believe that the examples below are indicative of problems of relative bias by omission, selection and presentation, with which fair-minded people can identify.

Bias by omission

'You cannot possibly think that' issues

One potential source of bias is a failure to include an outlook, viewpoint or information within a story or series that might be objectively regarded as being important. This might be because it simply does not cross the editor's mind that the viewpoint or perspective is possible, important or acceptable, or that the information is worthy. This is important because exclusion of a particular viewpoint or opinion on a subject might be expected to shift the 'Overton Window' of what it is politically acceptable to say. This can happen in such a way that a viewpoint becomes entirely eliminated from political discourse except at the margins.

On 19 September 2013, the BBC website ran a 'Viewpoints' piece highlighting different opinions on the new policy of taxpayer-funded school meals for all five-to-seven year olds. The

government's own pilot study found no health benefits for the policy and did not assess the opportunity cost of the spending. Yet the viewpoints promoted on the BBC website were limited to those who were happy with the policy, to those who hoped that it would be extended, through to those who were delighted with the policy. There was no perspective from anyone who objected to the policy. This was despite several major think tanks strongly objecting to it in the public domain: objections that were covered elsewhere in the media.¹⁴

It was only when the omission of this viewpoint was highlighted to the BBC that representatives of the Taxpayers' Alliance and Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) were also asked to submit their thoughts.¹⁵ Had this not been the case, a reader of the story on the BBC website who was not well versed in the broader public debate on this issue would have concluded that there was unanimous public support for the policy. It clearly did not occur to the BBC, until it was pointed out, that it was possible to object to the policy except on the grounds that it did not go far enough.

A frequent viewer of or listener to the BBC sees many examples of this 'relative bias by omission' in terms of the non-interventionist viewpoint being ignored. A recent example of this was the reporting of the government's new measures to try to combat the gender pay gap, through imposing new requirements on large companies. The coverage of the story on the BBC News website contained neither expert economic opinion on the use of crude average gender pay gap figures, nor dissenting opinion on the effectiveness of the policies.¹⁶ This is despite economists being extraordinarily sceptical about the whole 'gender pay gap' concept

14 For example, both the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* covered the story and objections to the policy. See www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2423727/Free-school-meals-child-7-austerity-Britain-afford-Nick-Cleggs-600m-giveaway.html and www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/17/clegg-school-meals-tory-deal.

15 www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-24142901

16 www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33515629

as a legitimate policy concern. Other newspapers covering this story, from the *Financial Times* to the *Daily Mail*, solicited opinion from a much wider range of sources.^{17,18} The BBC's coverage thus exhibited clear 'bias by omission' of important viewpoints. A more recent example on the same issue came on Equal Pay Day on 9 November, when the Fawcett Society's report asserted that men earn 14.2 per cent more per hour than women, which was reported on BBC Online. This is an official statistic, comparing the mean pay of working full-time men with women. But, crucially, and as other Office for National Statistics (ONS) data show, it does not control for age, occupation type, length of service, closeness to home of the job or interruptions in career, which means it is largely a meaningless comparator. None of this nuance was reported in the BBC article. Instead, the headline 'Women in full-time jobs "work for nothing" until 2016' implies the issue is a huge problem – and the only comment from another source was a supporting one from the Trade Union Congress (TUC).¹⁹

The next example shows that the BBC is not simply biased against positions that might be described as 'free market'. In the case of immigration, it tends to take a line that is biased in favour of a more free-market position. As explained in the serialisation of former BBC executive Roger Mosey's recent book, one evening the BBC late evening news ran a piece on immigration in a racially diverse part of Britain. The package featured one white, working-class voice, who said he was 'perfectly happy' about immigration in the area. Mosey asked the reporter whether this had in fact been representative of public opinion from his vox pops. The reporter explained that the other people interviewed had been 'fairly rabidly racist' and so could not be used. Thus, there was no

17 www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3160045/David-Cameron-forces-big-firms-publish-gender-pay-gap.html

18 www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3f1dfadc-297a-11e5-acfb-cbd2e1c81cca.html#axzz3frhj68Zb

19 www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-34764812

voice in the package opposed to immigration to the area, despite widespread concern about immigration levels. The BBC itself has acknowledged it was ‘slow to reflect the weight of concern [about immigration] in the wider community’ – a conclusion of the BBC-endorsed ‘Prebble report’.²⁰

Omission of EU withdrawalist voices

Whilst the above examples are interesting, one could easily claim that they are rarities, and that, in most cases, the BBC makes strenuous efforts to include all relevant perspectives. But one area where the BBC has come under sustained criticism is in its coverage of Britain’s membership of the EU.

News-watch – a monitoring organisation that tracks flagship news programmes such as Radio 4’s *Today* programme – has found that voices in favour of Britain’s exit from the EU tend to be under-represented relative to those in favour of continued membership.²¹ In this instance, the relative bias against voices in favour of EU exit is exemplified by comparing their coverage with public opinion polling, which shows between a third and half of the public being in favour of EU exit at any given time.²²

Fresh News-watch analysis commissioned for this chapter has sought to combine all News-watch survey sample data on Radio 4’s *Today* programme between March 2004 and June 2015.²³ In the monitored sample, the *Today* programme included 4,275 guest speakers on EU themes. Just 132 of these (3.2 per cent)

20 www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/breadth_opinion.html

21 Since 1999, News-watch has tracked more than 6,000 hours of BBC programming and analysed its coverage of EU news and current affairs. A back catalogue of their analysis can be found here: <http://news-watch.co.uk/monitoring-projects-and-reports/>.

22 See, for example: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/02/24/eu-referendum-record-lead/> and YouGov’s most recent polling on the subject: http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/q32gumm58k/ProspectResults_150602_EU.pdf.

23 A period of 252 weeks, 1,512 individual editions and 4,284 hours of monitoring.

were identifiably in favour of Britain's withdrawal from the EU. Furthermore, 72 per cent of withdrawalist speakers were representatives of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and over a third (37 per cent) of all withdrawalist contributions were from Nigel Farage alone. Left-leaning withdrawalist voices have accounted for just 0.07 per cent of all EU speakers over this period (three appearances from Labour Party supporters and one representative from the Socialist Labour Party).

In comparison with public opinion, the *Today* programme has exhibited significant bias by omission in terms of excluding the voices of those who believe Britain should leave the EU, particularly non-UKIP voices.

There are two potential explanations for this. The first is that a cultural world-view exists that is broadly pro-EU, and this manifests itself in the omission of strongly anti-EU voices. The second is that the nature of the BBC's position and funding means that it shapes choices on issues through the prism of the political process, rather than public concerns.

Whatever the mechanism, News-watch has examined other case studies that have delivered similar results. In a January 2013 edition of *Newsnight* devoted entirely to David Cameron's announcement of the in/out referendum, one might have expected the debate to be balanced between those favouring 'in' and 'out'. However, Nigel Farage was the lone overt withdrawalist on the show and was set against eighteen other guest speakers who favoured continued membership of the EU.

With a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU scheduled for 23 June 2016, this relative bias by omission could be very important indeed. Within academic media theory, there is a line of reasoning that media influence on audiences is not immediate but occurs more through a continual process of repeated arguments – the 'drip-drip-drip' effect. However, even with the referendum so close, there is still evidence of this bias by omission today.

News-watch's most recent analysis for this chapter examined business views of the EU referendum on the *Today* programme during the official 2015 General Election campaign. During this period, 25 speakers spoke about the subject, of which two gave a neutral response; two (both from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI)) said that the referendum decision was a matter for government, but they were generally pro-EU membership; and two (Conservative politicians) said they were in favour of the referendum but wished to remain in a reformed EU. The remaining nineteen speakers all saw the in/out referendum as a worry or a threat to business.

Certainly, this viewpoint about the impact of the referendum is legitimate. But polling undertaken for Business for Britain and YouGov has found that, in a sample of 1,000 small, medium and large firms, business backed the holding of a referendum by 66 per cent to 25 per cent. It seems reasonable to assume that a substantial proportion of those backing the referendum were doing so in the belief that Britain would be better off economically outside the EU, or at least that the referendum would not be overly damaging for British business. Yet the overwhelming narrative in the selection of guests was that the referendum, by creating uncertainty, would be bad for business and bad for Britain. Audiences on the *Today* programme have been offered no perspective that might suggest that the in/out referendum or leaving the EU is an opportunity for Britain rather than a concern.

Clearly, the future of the UK's position in the EU divides political parties and also the business community. But in its selection of guests, perhaps driven by the state of the political landscape at the time, the *Today* programme has at least exhibited a clear relative bias by omission against a significant strand of opinion. Given the BBC's funding mechanism and reputation, this could have an important impact as the UK prepares to vote in a referendum on membership of the EU.

Bias by selection

A second potential source of bias is ‘bias by selection’. This might entail particular issues or viewpoints being more frequently covered, or certain guests or organisations being more likely to be selected. This strand of bias can occur even if a particular journalist does not have a deliberate and overt ideological perspective; they might merely perceive certain stories or viewpoints to be more important or credible due to their own outlook, or because the BBC’s role and world-view encourages their coverage.

For example, in the past year there have been many more TV and radio shows dedicated to the subject of inequality on the BBC than, for example, the promotion of economic growth or reducing the deficit. This is despite all three issues being ranked as approximately equally important in surveys of the British public.²⁴ It is also despite the fact that inequality has been falling on most conventional measures in recent years. Within some of these inequality shows, there was a clear bias in the selection of guests. Jacques Peretti’s *The Super-Rich and Us* series, aired on BBC2, was clearly biased in the selection of guest contributors towards those who considered income and wealth inequality to be an extremely important and worrying topic.

Trying to find evidence of bias by selection in any systematic way, though, is incredibly difficult, given the breadth of BBC content. One must restrict analysis to a given narrow range of content to get meaningful results. The author accepts that there might be bias by selection in his own selection. However, the evidence below suggests that there is a strong case to answer.

24 http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/this-is-what-the-british-public-actually-care-about-xy-_vOEa9l

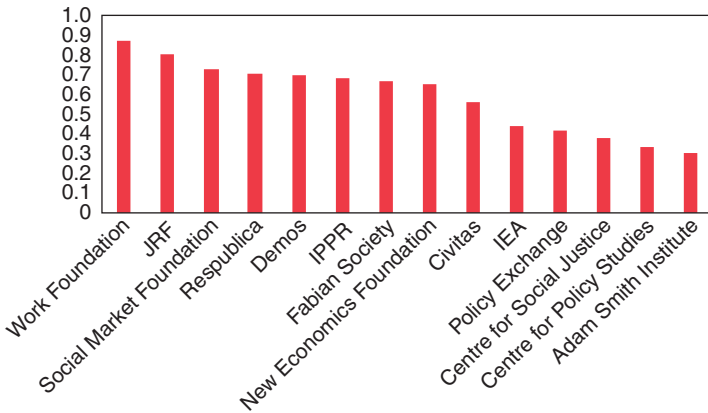
Selection of think tanks

The CPS recently published work on the use of think tanks on the BBC website between 1 June 2010 and 31 May 2013. Using the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* newspapers as ‘anchors’ for the left and right, regression analysis found that the BBC News website’s selection of think tanks was much more statistically sensitive to the appearance of that think tank in the *Guardian*, implying a relative bias towards left-leaning content or, at the very least, content more similar to the *Guardian* than the *Telegraph* (Latham 2013).

The CPS methodology was criticised on two grounds when it was released. Firstly, Chris Cook pointed out that journalists often used quotes or analysis from think tanks of different perspectives in their newspaper stories, so that the context of citations matters. Secondly, it was claimed that the *Guardian* is more interested in stories surrounding public services than the *Telegraph*. One might expect the BBC, a public service broadcaster, to also be more likely to cover such stories.

It has been suggested that rather than using newspapers as ‘anchors’ to test whether the BBC’s online coverage leans to the left or right, it would be better to use citations of think tanks in Hansard’s record of Parliament. It is suggested that right-leaning think tanks would be more likely to be cited by Conservative MPs and left-leaning think tanks would be more likely to be cited by Labour MPs (a methodology developed by Tim Groseclose in the US). The assumption here is that politicians are more likely to cite think tanks that broadly share their ideological world-view. There is obviously a problem with this approach in that the divides between parties are not as clear as the divides between think tanks, and the positioning of parties is also different from that of think tanks. Of course, it is possible that a member of a party might cite think tanks with views that oppose their own in order to make a point in a debate that his or her opponents’ views are criticised by think tanks that would be expected to be friendly to his or her party.

Figure 6 Number of citations by Labour politicians as a proportion of citations by Labour and Conservative politicians



Source: author's calculations from data from TheyWorkForYou.com

The author selected fourteen multidisciplinary think tanks from across the political spectrum that have had 20 or more Parliamentary citations (Lords and the Commons) amongst Conservative and Labour politicians between the 2010 and 2015 elections. The think tanks are ranked from the most left wing by this metric in Figure 6. In fact, the results generally accord with intuition regarding which think tanks we would expect to be the most left-leaning, with the possible exception of the New Economics Foundation.

As can be seen in Table 2, there is no evidence of correlation between the tendency for the BBC to select left-leaning think tanks as left-leaning is defined above.²⁵ This suggests that either

25 This searching was undertaken using the website TheyWorkForYou.com. All individual citations were counted, irrespective of whether they came from the same speaker or the same debate. Likewise, citations in written questions were counted too, except in instances where the think tank citation appears in Parliamentary questions repeated to many different Secretaries of State and ministers.

Table 2 Think-tank citations by politicians and the BBC News website

<i>Think tank</i>	<i>Labour mentions</i>	<i>Conservative mentions</i>	<i>Relative Labour mentions</i>	<i>BBC mentions</i>
Work Foundation	21	3	0.88	55
Joseph Rowntree Foundation	161	39	0.81	110
Social Market Foundation	21	8	0.72	18
Respublica	17	7	0.71	16
Demos	46	20	0.70	85
IPPR	106	49	0.68	104
Fabian Society	14	7	0.67	37
New Economics Foundation	19	10	0.66	39
Civitas	14	11	0.56	40
IEA	19	24	0.44	104
Policy Exchange	34	47	0.42	139
Centre for Social Justice	62	103	0.38	82
Centre for Policy Studies	16	32	0.33	33
Adam Smith Institute	6	14	0.30	37
Correlation between relative Labour mentions and BBC mentions				-0.1

Source: politician citations from TheyWorkForYou.com. BBC News website mentions using targeted Google search

the BBC exhibits no relative biases in its selection of think tanks, or that any biases that do occur are contextual. Nevertheless, the data seem to suggest no systematic 'bias by selection' here.

One possibility, though, is that there might still be relative bias in selection in terms of the *types* of stories in which different think tanks are cited. The research also reviewed all of the 410 BBC media hits that the IEA received in a twelve-month period between July 2014 and June 2015, from appearances on broadcast through to mentions on the BBC website.

It is notable that, out of those 410 mentions, the IEA was not asked to comment or was quoted once on immigration by the BBC, despite the clear classical liberal position of IEA authors and senior staff on this topic. We were also quoted on poverty only once, despite having published two major research papers by Dr Kristian Niemietz in recent years, which have been widely discussed in the print media and highly regarded by think tanks of all shades of opinion.

How can a free-market think tank get so much coverage on welfare but not on poverty (on which we have done far more extensive work)? And how can it be that a classical liberal organisation has received no coverage on immigration in a twelve-month period, despite its prominence as an issue?

One potential explanation is that the editorial teams of many BBC programmes have clear priors about the world-view associated with the staff of a free-market think tank, predicated along some left–right dichotomy. Since ‘free-market’ economics is associated in the UK more with the ‘right’ of the political spectrum than the ‘left’, many journalists project other perceived ‘right’ opinions onto free-market think tanks. For example, there is a range of opinion that assumes that the ‘right’ does not care about the poor, which might explain why we rarely get asked to discuss poverty. It is also perceived that right-leaning people are opposed to immigration. Over the past few years, there have been several occasions when the IEA communications team has received calls from BBC journalists who have assumed that an IEA spokesperson will be opposed to free movement of people within the EU.

It should be noted that such inherent biases will also apply to certain think tanks on the left, though perhaps more on social issues than on economic issues. It might be assumed, for example, that a left-leaning organisation will have socially liberal views on the role of the state in relation to sexual matters, or will be in favour of Britain remaining in the EU.

Thought for the Day

One area where a BBC show has editorial control over the selection of guests is on the Radio 4 *Today* programme slot *Thought for the Day*. *Thought for the Day* is broadcast each morning (Monday to Saturday) at around 7.50 a.m. and entails a scripted monologue of around three minutes in length from an invited speaker. The slot aims to deliver 'reflections from a faith perspective on issues and people in the news'. The theme is selected by the invited commentator and compiled under the auspices of the Manchester-based BBC Religion and Ethics department, separate from *Today's* editorial team.

Research undertaken by News-watch surveyed all editions of *Thought for the Day* available within the BBC online archive to assess how issues related to economics and business are discussed. This allows us to make an assessment of whether there is evidence of some form of anti-capitalist or anti-market bias by selection for the slot.

Our overall sample was 976 separate editions. Of these, 167 (17 per cent) included discussion of economics, business, finance and matters of public policy necessitating economic policy judgements.

This sample was then coded according to whether the speaker offered a positive, negative or neutral/factual/mixed perspective on market-based and capitalist activity within the issue under discussion. The coding frame was set such that positive opinions incorporated those extolling the virtues of business activity or

capitalists, the importance of economic growth and economic freedom and the improvements in living standards seen under capitalism. Negative opinions included those that denounced market-based activities, highlighted negative examples of business activity, questioned the morality of capitalism and/or demanded significant interventions or controls on voluntary activity and exchange. All other contributions fell under the neutral, factual or mixed heading.

An important point to highlight with the negative opinions is that these often contained denouncement of genuinely corrupt activities – not things that those believing in a free economy would seek to defend. They are counted as negative here, though, because the continued highlighting of negative stories in relation to business is seldom balanced with positive stories (such as private companies delivering high-quality education in the developing world, for example). The selection of stories therefore contributes to a climate in which business and market-based activity is heavily associated with cronyism and corruption.

The results of this analysis are striking. Of the 167 editions analysed, 109 (65 per cent) expressed a negative opinion; 45 (27 per cent) were neutral, factual or mixed, and only 13 (8 per cent) gave any sort of positive perspective on the theme. As such, negative commentary outweighed positive commentary by a factor of more than eight to one.²⁶

In the relatively small number of editions that could be regarded as positive towards pro-market or capitalist positions, it was noted that businesses could achieve good outcomes, that businessmen were capable of acts of giving, insight and philanthropy and that such efforts could be valuable to communities. But these were vastly outweighed by what might be described as a plethora of anti-market or anti-capitalist opinions.

²⁶ The full results of this exercise, along with key quotes from each edition and commentary as to why particular coding decisions were made, are available from the author.

- Several contributors denounced multinational corporations and the plutocrats who now selfishly own so much of the world's wealth.
- The vulnerabilities of the poor were highlighted as if capitalism caused poverty, but the role of capitalism in alleviating poverty was barely mentioned.
- Cuts to government spending in areas such as welfare and health were focused on regularly, but without corresponding attention being given to problems such as dependency or the strains placed on provision due to an ageing population.
- Economic growth – the driver of improved living standards – was opposed and downplayed, whilst several contributors attacked the straw man idea that politicians seek to maximise GDP.²⁷
- Free-market ideology was attacked – with crude denouncements of neoliberalism, Ayn Rand and the idea of 'trickle down' economics – even though there is no real evidence of any prominent free-market economist ever advocating the latter.²⁸
- The issue of tax avoidance was discussed in moral terms, implying it was inherently moral for corporations to pay more tax than was legally due. No contributor suggested politicians had the power to change tax law.
- In several instances, capitalist activities were said to lead to 'exploitation'. The existence of sweat shops was lamented, without ever discussing the likely negative impact the non-existence of these industries would have in developing countries.²⁹

27 www.iea.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/files/Selfishness,%20Greed%20and%20Capitalism.pdf, p. 37.

28 www.iea.org.uk/blog/forget-trickle-down-in-a-free-market-the-rich-dont-gain-at-the-poor%E2%80%99s-expense

29 www.iea.org.uk/blog/sweat-shops-and-the-need-for-libertarian-moral-outrage

- Inequality was regularly held up as being self-evidently a huge problem, with highly contentious figures from Oxfam and others cited. At no point was it pointed out that global inequality was falling.³⁰
- The financial crash and illegal activities of banks and financial entities were regularly discussed, but nothing was said about the role of government policies, including regulatory and monetary failure, in contributing to these outcomes.
- Markets and business were said to be eroding moral values. Investors in art (from the ‘jet set and hedge funds’), for example, were concerned only in the value of the paintings and had no sense of aesthetics. Anti-consumerism and a dislike of advertising pervaded several contributions.
- Scandals in certain sectors and businesses – G4S, Libor, UBS, Findus Foods, etc. – were used to justify wholesale reforms to business policy.
- New technologies such as Bitcoin and smartphones were denounced, with rare exposition of the benefits of these new technologies to people’s lives.
- Speakers frequently advocated the need for ambitious action to combat climate change. Strikingly, whilst the human cost of climate change was mentioned, there was no discussion of the cost to the global poor of mitigation policies.

While one might expect religious leaders to focus on certain topics – such as the conditions of the poor, inequality, business morality and the common good – this need not necessitate such stringent anti-market views as seen from the large sample examined. There is a clear bias in selection here against opinions that hold business, capitalism and economic activity not

30 <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/01/beware-oxfams-dodgy-statistics-on-wealth-inequality/>

centrally planned by governments in a positive light. *Thought for the Day*, in its discussion of economic issues at least, overwhelmingly represents a world-view that, at best, is sceptical of capitalism and voluntary market-based exchange, and, at worst, disdains it.

Bias by presentation

Perhaps the most difficult form of relative bias to measure is 'bias by presentation'. This entails examining the context around how stories and participants are presented as well as how opinions are introduced – and whether this means the audience is nudged towards believing that one subjective viewpoint is right or more credible.

Value judgements

An obvious example is the use of value judgements in presenting a story. One that immediately springs to mind is the way that BBC journalist Norman Smith covered the 2014 Autumn Statement, reporting that the OBR had forecast that spending levels as a proportion of GDP would likely fall to levels last seen in the late 1930s. Rather than just outlining this fact, the presentation of the story by Smith entailed substantial value judgements about what this would mean (my emphasis in italics):

when you sit down and read the Office for Budget Responsibility report it reads like a *book of doom*. It is *utterly terrifying*, suggesting that spending will have to be *hacked back* to the levels of the 1930s as a proportion of GDP. That is *an extraordinary concept*, you're back to the land of *Road to Wigan Pier*.³¹

31 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11272814/PM-attacks-BBC-over-Wigan-Pier-cuts-coverage.html

The OBR figures have since been strongly criticised as being misleading in terms of historical comparisons.³² For example, real GDP (and therefore spending) is much higher; the figures used different measures of GDP, which makes an enormous difference in the comparisons; and there were vastly different sums spent on defence and debt interest in the 1930s (and by implication the residual on items such as health and education).

But, even if the figures had been directly comparable, would state spending at 35 per cent of GDP be so ‘terrifying’? Is it really terrifying for the state in the UK to spend the same proportion of national income as the state in other developed countries, such as Australia, Switzerland and South Korea? Making this comparison led to weeks of media coverage with this claim being repeated.

Sometimes descriptions are more systematically misleading. For example, in recent years there has been a proliferation of stories about tax avoidance, often involving large companies such as Amazon, Starbucks and Google. Yet in 24 of the 78 stories on the BBC website between 2012 and 2015 that mentioned ‘Amazon’ and ‘tax avoidance’, corporation tax paid by companies was misleadingly compared with sales revenues – which has nothing to do with the tax base for corporation tax that is profit.³³ As it happens, these cases are all much more complicated in other ways, but the comparison of corporation tax paid with sales is meaningless and clearly designed to influence the reputations of those companies and views on tax avoidance.³⁴

32 www.iea.org.uk/blog/is-george-osborne-really-returning-us-to-a-1930s-government-accurate-comparisons-suggest-a-defi

33 Author’s calculation from Google search of BBC website between 2012 and 2015 for ‘Amazon’ and ‘tax avoidance’.

34 This was an example first raised by my colleague, Philip Booth: www.iea.org.uk/blog/bbc-corporation-tax-horror-story.

Health warnings

Perhaps the most egregious example of this relative bias by presentation came back in March 2012, when the subject of minimum alcohol pricing was under discussion. BBC2's *Newsnight* had organised a debate to take place on the subject between Eric Joyce (an MP opposed to the proposal) and Sarah Wollaston MP (who was in favour), chaired by Emily Maitlis.³⁵ Wollaston was introduced as 'a GP and a Tory MP, not to mention a member of the Commons' Health Select Committee'. The introduction for her opponent was: 'Eric Joyce, an MP against minimum pricing, was forced to quit the Labour Party after a drunken punch-up in the House of Commons bar. Tonight he's under curfew in his Edinburgh home.' The way that this was introduced clearly would leave viewers uninitiated in the subject to simply assume that Wollaston had a monopoly on credibility to talk about the issue, even though both MPs were on the show to assess the economic and political implications of the policy, as well as the health effects.

Though not as overt as this, it is common for BBC coverage to attach 'health warnings' to participants in debates. In the context of a discussion, unbalanced introductions act to undermine the credibility of one of the speakers, or enhance the credibility of the other.

Academic economists have noted how a common form of media bias involves putting 'an ideological label on conservative and libertarian organisations and interviewees, but not on liberal and leftist groups' (Boaz 2010). This sort of 'bias by presentation' is commonplace on the BBC.

Building on CPS research (Latham 2013), the treatment of fifteen multidisciplinary think tanks on the BBC news website was analysed between the general elections in 2010 and 2015. All

35 See <http://velvetgloveironfist.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/entirely-matter-for-you.html> for details.

articles containing the names of the think tanks were examined to ascertain whether health warnings had been used to describe the organisations.³⁶ ‘Health warnings’ here, as with Latham’s analysis, include: (a) a statement of the ideological or political position of the think tank, (b) an expression of the think tank’s prior position on an issue or (c) mention of an affiliation of any political actor to the think tank. The results are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen, think tanks perceived to be conservative or free market are much more likely to be ascribed a health warning. The four main think tanks that advocate for free-market policies are given ideological warning labels including ‘free market’, ‘centre-right’ and ‘right-wing’ often: the IEA 22.1 per cent of the time, the CPS 30.3 per cent of the time, Policy Exchange 41.7 per cent of the time and the Adam Smith Institute 59.5 per cent of the time. The communitarian conservative *Respublica* is given an ideological warning label 50 per cent of the time.

In contrast, left-leaning think tanks are given these labels far less often. The New Economics Foundation is probably the most left-leaning policy think tank in the country, and its output lies further from mainstream opinion than any other.³⁷ Yet the only health warnings it has been ascribed are, in effect, compliments – it was described as a ‘sustainability think tank’ and a ‘member of the Tescopoly alliance’. Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), despite having clear ideological left-leaning positions, are introduced as such much less often than their equivalents at Policy Exchange or the Centre for Policy Studies.

36 The think tanks used were: the Work Foundation, the New Economics Foundation, the Social Market Foundation, Demos, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Civitas, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), the IEA, the CPS, the Centre for Social Justice, Policy Exchange, the Fabian Society, *Respublica* and the Adam Smith Institute.

37 Its policy recommendations, for example, have recently included simply reducing the length of the working week: www.neweconomics.org/blog/entry/reduce-the-working-week-to-30-hours.

Health warnings such as ‘centre-left’ or ‘centre-right’ are used to inform the readers that a think tank or organisation might be seeking to shift public opinion in a particular direction. Therefore, we might expect that think tanks with close associations or formal relationships with political parties would be more likely to be assigned ideological warning labels. Thus, it is unsurprising that the Fabian Society receives health warnings a very large proportion of the time, since it is actually affiliated with the Labour Party. Likewise, the Centre for Policy Studies has strong political associations with the Conservative Party. There is a greyer area as far as the Centre for Social Justice and Policy Exchange are concerned. They are independent of the Conservative Party, but there is no question that there is regular exchange of personnel and ideas between those groups and the government. The situation is very similar to that which existed between the IPPR and the Labour Party. However, the IPPR was given health warnings on about one-sixth of appearances, the Centre for Social Justice on about one-third and Policy Exchange on over 40 per cent of the occasions on which they appeared.

This, therefore, seems like a clear relative bias. The BBC News website is much more likely to use ideological or political labels when introducing right-of-centre or free-market opinion. It could be that because they think left-leaning think tanks are more credible, do better research or – most likely – because these think tanks are closer to their own world-view, they do not even notice the relative positions of these think tanks.

Sometimes, the BBC uses positive adjectives to describe think tanks, such as ‘independent’: the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) is often given this label. As the final two columns of Table 3 show, sometimes other think tanks are given this label too. That this adjective is so rarely used makes it a powerful, positive signal that the viewpoint should be taken seriously and is untainted by political biases.

Table 3 Think-tank mentions and health warnings on the BBC website in the previous Parliament

<i>Think tank</i>	<i>BBC mentions</i>	<i>% of mentions with health warnings</i>	<i>Health warnings</i>	<i>% of mentions with positive adjectives</i>	<i>Positive adjectives</i>
Work Foundation	55	0.0		3.6	'a not-for-profit body', 'an independent body'
New Economics Foundation	39	5.1	'member of Tescopoly Alliance', 'sustainability think tank'	7.7	'independent think tank'
Social Market Foundation	18	5.6	'left-of-centre think tank'	0.0	
Demos	85	11.8	'left-leaning think tank', 'political think tank', 'centre-left think tank', 'left-wing think tank', 'left-leaning think tank', 'centre-left research organisation'	7.1	'independent', 'independent political researchers', 'cross-party think tank'
Joseph Rowntree Foundation	110	13.6	'anti-poverty think tank', 'social policy charity', 'social justice charity', 'researched poverty', 'anti-poverty charity', 'social chairty', 'social policy research chairty', 'social equality pressure group'	0.0	
Civitas	40	15.0	'right-leaning', 'think-tank interested in limited government and personal freedom'	10.0	'independent think tank'

Continued

<i>Think tank</i>	<i>BBC mentions</i>	<i>% of mentions with health warnings</i>	<i>Health warnings</i>	<i>% of mentions with positive adjectives</i>	<i>Positive adjectives</i>
IPPR	104	16.3	'centre-left think tank', 'a left-of-centre think tank', 'left-leaning'	0.0	
IEA	104	22.1	'right-wing think tank', 'free-market think tank', 'arguably the most vocal think tank opposed to HS2', 'right-leaning think tank', 'centre-right'	0.0	
CPS	33	30.3	'founded by Margaret Thatcher', 'right-wing', 'free-market', 'former Conservative party chairman', 'pro-free market', 'centre-right'	0.0	
Centre for Social Justice	82	32.9	'set up by the Conservative MP Iain Duncan Smith', 'right-leaning think tank', 'Conservative-leaning think tank', 'right-wing think tank', 'a think tank which helped shape the Tories' manifesto'	6.1	'independent'
Policy Exchange	139	41.7	'centre-right think tank', 'right-wing think tank', 'right-leaning think tank', 'Conservative think tank', 'think tank on the right', 'right-of-centre', 'centre-right research organisation', 'government backed think tank' 'petri dish of ideas for the Conservative leadership', 'pro-free market', 'political think tank'	0.0	

Continued

<i>Think tank</i>	<i>BBC mentions</i>	<i>% of mentions with health warnings</i>	<i>Health warnings</i>	<i>% of mentions with positive adjectives</i>	<i>Positive adjectives</i>
Fabian Society	37	45.9	'left-of-centre', 'Labour-supporting', 'left-wing', 'affiliated to the Labour party', 'socialist', 'centre-left', 'left-leaning', 'Labour-leaning'	0.0	
Respublica	16	50.0	'centre-right think tank', 'concept of "Red Tory"', 'Mr Cameron's favourite', 'right-leaning', 'centre-right'	0.0	
Adam Smith Institute	37	59.5	'free market think tank', 'pro-free market think tank', 'free market economics think tank', 'right-wing think tank', 'known for its work on privatisation', 'argues for smaller government and lower taxes', 'a favourite of Margaret Thatcher'	2.7	'independent'

Source: author's targeted Google search of BBC News website

This adjective, however, simply raises the question, 'independent of what?' The IFS has received funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which has, in turn, been described as a 'pressure group' by the BBC. The author does not for a moment question the academic integrity or very scholarly nature of the work of the IFS. However, this example shows the subjectivity that perhaps lies behind the adjective 'independent'. All of the think tanks in Table 3 (with the exception of the Labour-affiliated Fabian

Society) are ‘independent’ of political parties, operating separately from them. But few are ever labelled ‘independent’. What makes the IFS more independent than, say, Respublica? It would be worth the BBC clarifying in writing exactly what they mean when they use the ‘independent’ label.

Interruptions

Another way in which bias can manifest itself is through interviews and how they are conducted – for example, the degree of hostility of the interviewer. It is likely that interviewers are more instinctively hostile to those whose views they disagree with or find alien, meaning that a broad sociological bias can lead to some interviewees being treated differently if they fall outside a particular world-view.

News-watch analysis of the EU debate has in the past found that eurosceptic voices are interrupted, for example, far more often than pro-European politicians.³⁸ More recently, in a case study example, News-watch showed two interviews in its Winter 2013 Survey, highlighting how pro-European and eurosceptic voices were treated differently in similar length interviews with the same interviewer. On 18 November 2013, Paul Sykes, a UKIP donor, was interviewed by Evan Davis on the *Today* programme. The conversation switched between them 60 times (approximately eleven times per minute). In contrast, Davis interviewing Karel De Gucht, a European Trade Commissioner, saw the conversation switch just ten times (twice per minute). This is shown in Figure 7. The word count for the De Gucht interview was also much slower, suggesting that, as well as facing fewer interruptions, the Commissioner was able to make his point in a more relaxed or measured way. Of course, a single case study does not make

38 <http://news-watch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Today-Programme-Survey-Summer-20061.pdf>

the point unequivocally. There might be other occasions when the eurosceptic interviewee had a relatively free ride. However, as noted above, earlier research suggests that this case study is representative of a general problem.

Conclusion

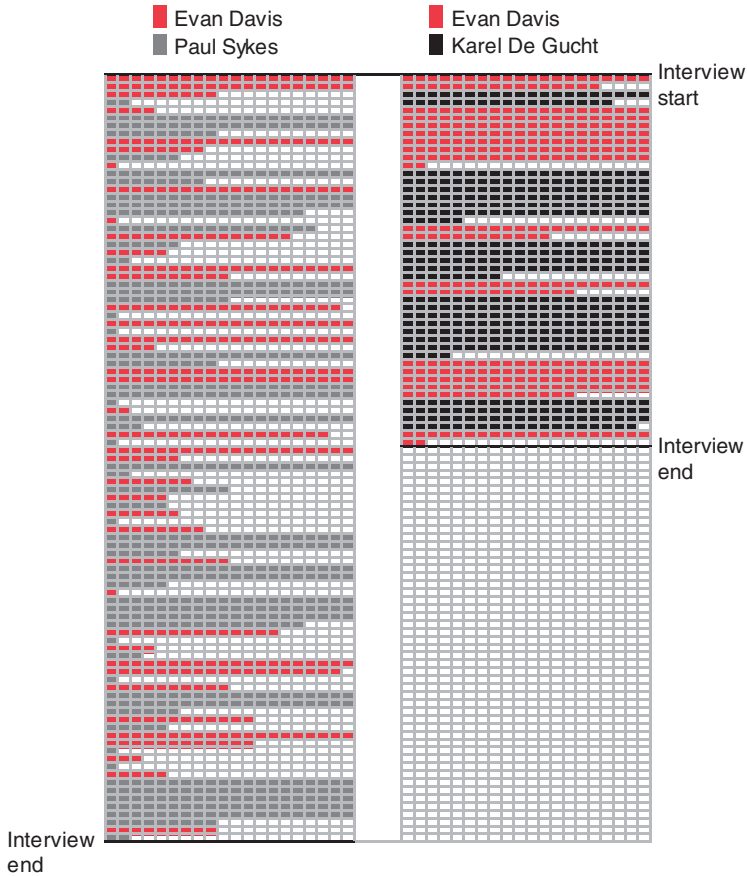
Bias is difficult to measure systematically. The BBC has been accused of being biased towards liberal establishment opinion in the past, and there is evidence across a range of case studies consistent with this sort of sociological and institutional explanation.

Biases by omission, selection and presentation (assessed through examination of the context of stories) are the three main ways in which biases manifest themselves. This under-representation of certain viewpoints and slant in selection and presentation is unlikely to be deliberate and decreed from on high; it is more reflective of the underlying beliefs of the BBC journalists, and the structures within which they operate – arising in ways that the journalists themselves might not even consider biased.

The question remains: what are the policy responses? It is not argued that other sources of news and comment are not biased. Commercial news sources, sources financed by charitable trusts and other forms of voluntary news and comment provision (for example, blogs) also have biases. There is no evidence that such sources tend to have a disproportionate pro-free-market or even pro-commerce bias, though some do. In the UK, there is a range of views expressed in the print media, in blogs and in broadcast media and the arts, which are funded from a variety of sources. A range of media, some of which present objective facts and others that offer news and comment from a variety of perspectives is healthy.

However, the position of the BBC is problematic for several reasons.

Figure 7 EU interview comparisons



The BBC has a huge share of the news and comment market, the size of which would lead to serious competition concerns if the BBC were a private organisation; in other words, it receives privileged treatment in this respect.³⁹ The BBC is the biggest provider of

39 The BBC has a privileged position in the proper sense of the word – there are special rules (or exemptions from rules) that do not apply to other organisations.

news on every platform on which it has a presence. Approximately 75 per cent of television news watched in the UK is provided by the BBC, and measures of market power for radio news are around the same. The BBC has somewhat less – though still considerable – market power in online news (see Ofcom 2014).

Furthermore, it should not be possible for an organisation to exercise such market power in an area as subjective as news provision when those who fund the organisation have no choice in the matter. In addition, the fact that the BBC is trusted means that its bias is more influential. As has been noted, the BBC also has an interest in the political process and is happy to use licence-payer funds to promote its cause.

Privatisation would not lead to or guarantee the elimination of relative biases from coverage; the work of Tim Groseclose on the US shows this is extraordinarily unlikely. However, privatisation could lead to change over time and a more sceptical viewing public. Most importantly of all, however, privatisation gives the right of exit to those who do not wish to listen to the programmes broadcast by the BBC. If the normal competition rules applied to the BBC, there would also be a greater plurality of positions. Broadcasters with different biases could compete.

Despite the case made in this chapter, there is no doubt that the BBC has a reputation – generally well deserved – for high quality and broad news coverage, for which it is respected. A privatised BBC would bear a considerable commercial cost if this reputation were impaired; thus, there would be an incentive to maintain it. This is especially true if we consider the worldwide reputation of the BBC and the ability it would have as a private entity to expand its broadcasting reach outside the UK.

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