

Introduction

Impartiality is one of the most fundamental elements of content-making at the ABC.

It begins with our statutory obligation to ensure that we both gather and present news and information impartially. This duty is central to our public service purpose to inform our audiences and fundamental to our reputation as a credible and trustworthy broadcaster. Audiences come to the ABC for fair and unbiased information which will help them to gain a reasonable understanding of an issue and to make up their own minds.

The requirement for impartiality is testing, precisely because of the fundamental challenge at the heart of the concept – *everyone* regards the world through the prism of their own values, and *no one* is truly able to either make or consume media free of those values. The more important the story, the stronger that tension becomes.

Impartiality is therefore an art rather than a science, but like all good art, it rests on skill, practice, experience and the right set of tools. If you learn to ask yourself the right questions when confronted with a challenging story or subject you'll come closer to achieving impartial coverage than if you don't – and remember that the ABC has a strong 'upward referral' structure in place, so always talk to your editorial manager if in doubt.

This Guidance Note is intended to help by explaining some of the concepts and strategies that lie beneath impartial content-making, and especially the key standards laid out in Section 4 of the Editorial Policies (listed below).

Impartiality and diversity of perspectives – the key standards

- 4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality.
- 4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.
- 4.3 Do not state or imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of the ABC. The ABC takes no editorial stance other than its commitment to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity.
- 4.4 Do not misrepresent any perspective.
- 4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

These standards apply formally to news, current affairs content and to factual content across radio, television and online. It is not limited to content produced by ABC News. Because of its particular challenges, there is a special note covering [Factual drama](#).

Other editorial standards may also be relevant, depending on the specific circumstances applying in each case, so you might also want to take a look at the related guidance notes on [Accuracy](#), [Fair opportunity to respond](#), and the policy on managing [Conflict of interest](#) [*internal link for ABC staff only*].

Impartiality – what could *possibly* go wrong?

Before we discuss the processes and disciplines to help achieve due impartiality in ABC content, it's worth identifying some of the most common pitfalls you are likely to confront as a content maker.

The very nature of journalism, and the associated areas of factual and topical content creation, can work against impartiality.

That's because one of the strongest motivations in creating good content is to give that content **impact**. Put simply, we want audiences to sit up and take notice of what we produce.

The techniques available to achieve this are many and varied, and can include:

- the use of emotive language, audio and imagery;
- the temptation to divide a story neatly into heroes and villains, and suppress nuance;
- the risk that difficult or awkward questions will not be asked, lest the answer weaken the impact of a narrative;
- the temptation to rely on the usual, predictable sources, and miss opportunities to include a more diverse mix of voices;
- the tendency to assume a target audience are all 'on the same page', with shared assumptions and starting points that they bring to a piece of content;
- the desire to overstate key points, so that every development becomes a breakthrough, every setback a crisis, concern becomes outrage and tempered criticism becomes a swingeing attack.

These techniques, habits and exaggerations are rarely employed to mislead or in the service of ideology or bias. More often, they stem from a content maker's commitment to the story they are telling, and a desire to communicate the significance of that content.

But in most cases, powerful stories are made more powerful by being told in a measured and accurate way, without exaggerating or over-stating for effect.

For the most part, the solution is the application of **scrutiny**.

A good journalist, a good interviewer, a good broadcaster will:

- scrutinise their own views, their own assumptions;
- scrutinise closely and equally the views of all those in their story;
- ask the tough questions, assume nothing, and always look for the uncomfortable fact that delivers depth and nuance to a story.

The following sections of this guidance note pick up those themes, and explain how they can be used to achieve due impartiality.

What does due impartiality mean?

Many have asked why 'impartiality' is qualified by the term 'due'. Due is a little word with a great deal of significance. Achieving due impartiality involves making considered editorial judgements about the nature of the content and the context in which it appears. To do this well we need to think about the different factors that individually or collectively may affect the due impartiality of the content. These include its accuracy, whether it deals with a contentious subject or not, where it appears, the way it is described to the audience and so on. Some of these factors are considered in greater detail below.

The ABC has too many types of content to capture here, from the long-form investigative documentary units 4 Corners and Background Briefing through to specialist TV and Radio programs and online portals, fact-based lifestyle programming, daily news and current affairs programs, and daily local programs on regional, metropolitan and national radio. But whatever you are working on, if it involves presenting *information* to the public, then you must give careful consideration to the level of impartiality which is due.

Your judgement about achieving due impartiality will be based on factors laid out in the Principles for section 4 of the Editorial Policies. Ask yourself:

- **What is the type, subject and nature of the content?** Is it a serious or a lighter topic? Is it a matter of public importance and current debate or does it relate to uncontroversial or workaday matters? Is it a complex, pre-recorded investigative piece, an online article or a live to air interview etc? Is it a news bulletin or a lifestyle program? Is it a program in which the opinions of the presenter are expected (such as *Media Watch*) or not (like *Four Corners*)? The more serious and important the topic is, the more impartiality will matter.
- **What are the circumstances in which the content was made and presented?** Is the content something that has been researched, planned and produced over a long period or is it a news piece, produced with a tight turn-around and limited information. Is it an acquired production from an external source or a co-production with the ABC? Are there special considerations relating to when the program is aired, such as an election

being underway? The more time you have to prepare content, the greater the expectation will be that a diversity of perspectives is incorporated.

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- There may be very good reasons for this, but is your content exploring or reporting on a **specific aspect of an issue or providing an opportunity for only a single view** to be expressed? If so, a right of reply or further coverage may be needed. Think about what timeframe would be appropriate for the presentation of alternative, relevant viewpoints.

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- **What are the likely audience expectations of the content?** Is it purporting to be a factual, accurate and balanced account of events, or clearly-framed as one person's view of history/events? Is the audience given enough information to understand the context? If it arises, think about pointing your audience to other programs or forums where alternative views might be found.

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- **Are you reflecting a range of principal, relevant perspectives on this subject?** (See below)

If it is understood and exercised correctly, due impartiality drives good-story-telling, ensuring that your narrative is propelled by the weight of evidence and the strength and diversity of your arguments rather than by assumption and prejudice.

What impartiality isn't...

1. **'He said...she said' reporting** in which everyone gets an equal say, no conclusions are drawn and no judgements made, regardless of the weight, merit or level of support for any position. This type of reporting fails to recognise that an evaluation or judgement informed by evidence, investigation and fairness is the strongest line of all.
2. **False Balance.** Sometimes people feel pressured to provide equal time to every facet of every argument. For example, ABC program teams have received furious letters over many years from conspiracy theorists demanding a right of reply every time Al Qaeda is mentioned as the perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks. If we followed this practice, it could lead to programming which is actually inaccurate, not only in the sense of being factually wrong, but also in giving the impression there is significant community support for what is in reality a fringe element.

Where possible, the ABC determines the editorial approach to its coverage by the weight of evidence, as explained shortly.

Topics which can lure content-makers down the path of false balance include water fluoridation and vaccination. *Media Watch* touched on some consequences in this episode from October 2012:

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3601416.htm>.

Contention

How do you decide if you're dealing with a contentious matter which requires careful focus on impartiality?

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A story should be regarded as contentious if there is/are:

- obvious public debate (including via talkback radio and letters to the editor);
- polarised views and evidence of high emotion (this may well apply to historic as well as immediate controversies);
- contradictory 'facts' and anecdotes circulating via social and other media.

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Remember that levels of contention will rise and fall. Subjects that used to divide the community but are not currently matters of day-to-day debate, may not require the strongest focus on impartiality. Always be conscious that old controversies may flare again. For example, a documentary about official Australian government policies towards refugees from Europe in the 1930s could take on new meaning in the context of current arguments around asylum seeker policy, and you, as a content-maker, would need to be very conscious of this.

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Ask yourself:

- **What's the level of debate or importance (whether local, national or international) to a reasonable proportion of your target audience?**
- **What's the topicality of the issue?**
- **Do I need to consider sensitivity (for example, in terms of beliefs or cultural expectations in sections of the target audience)?**
- **Would it be more appropriate to pre-record an interview on a contentious subject than to tackle it live?**

Hallmarks of impartiality

So, what are the **hallmarks** of impartiality? These are described in the Principles to section 4 of the Editorial Policies as:

- a balance that follows the weight of evidence
- fair treatment
- open-mindedness
- opportunities over time for principal relevant perspectives on matters of contention to be expressed.

In addition, impartial content-making also relies on accuracy (getting the story right) and independence (avoiding any conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived).

Balance following the weight of evidence

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Balance is a crucial element of impartiality, but impartial treatment of an issue or topic does not mean always opposing one view with another. ‘Equal time’ is sometimes seen as the easy answer here, but assessing impartiality is more complex than counting the minutes and seconds broadcast or lines of text published.

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The ABC does not require differing viewpoints to be presented evenly, as if they were poised on either side of a scale. In some circumstances, when justified by the weight of evidence, it will be absolutely appropriate for you to give more time or space to one perspective over another. A clear, current example of this is in the vaccination debate where near-universal professional consensus on the value of childhood inoculation is opposed by a vocal minority, who are passionate in their cause but unsupported by the weight of scientific evidence. It is legitimate to report on (and challenge) their views at times when it’s editorially justified, but we would not accord them the same weight of coverage as the scientists and medical organisations on the other side.

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There are at least two things to bear in mind here though. Weight of evidence is easier to establish for some issues than for others, and must not be claimed without the research on your part to back it up. It can also change over time, so keep your eyes open. It is important that we let our audiences know where consensus lies on an issue at any given time, as we aim to keep covering all issues in a manner which will help them to understand the relative support for different positions, to weigh this information and make up their own minds.

There are also more difficult, values-based issues where science cannot help us. The position that homosexual couples should be entitled to marry under the law is a case in point where even the words become difficult. Opponents of this position assert that what some might regard as a neutral-sounding term (such as ‘marriage equality’) could be seen by others as betraying a bias in its favour. There are no rules for picking your way through these minefields, except to remain informed about the issues as they evolve and to keep an open mind.

This would mean, for example, that you are careful not to confuse opinion polls with ‘weight of evidence’. It’s pertinent to your story if there appears to be a clear majority in favour of one position over another, but it doesn’t give you license to ignore or marginalise other perspectives or to stereotype, however unconsciously, those who hold positions contrary to the prevailing wisdom or your own personal views.

Fair treatment

Impartiality is not the same as simply being fair, though it is unlikely content will fail the impartiality standards if it is fair-minded in its treatment of both people and ideas.

Fair treatment relates to the way in which you frame an issue and the manner in which you interact with the people you talk to for a story - depending again, on the subject and nature of your content. For example, you should:

- Introduce or wrap up interviews or segments in a way that provides appropriate context or background, and summarises fairly the points of view expressed. Pay careful attention to accuracy as omitting either

information or context may have the effect of favouring one side over another and can therefore signal a lack of impartiality.

- Avoid signing off interviews with phrases like ‘good luck’, when there is a risk they might be seen as ABC endorsement of a particular view. This is particularly relevant during election campaign interviews with candidates or in relation to particularly contentious or controversial subjects.
- Choose language that is clear and not emotive, hyperbolic, inflammatory or derogatory. We all want to be interesting, but exaggerated language (such as ‘polls collapsing’) lacks clarity and should be avoided.
- Also be mindful about your use of music (there are some crazy lyrics out there) and images.
- Treat interviewees and other participants with civility and respect unless there is a compelling reason not to do so.
- Ask well-informed, relevant questions. It is legitimate for questioning to be provocative or for the questioner to adopt the role of ‘devil’s advocate’ to introduce opposing viewpoints for discussion or response.
- Provide sufficient opportunity for interviewees to answer questions or state their views, notwithstanding there will be situations where interruptions will be appropriate - for example, to elicit or clarify a response to a question which the interviewee is not answering, or not answering clearly, relevantly and within a reasonable time.
- Let the audience know if an invitation to contribute has been either declined or not answered. Perhaps a written statement was provided to be read or published. Whatever the circumstances, it’s important to tell the audience about the steps you took to include other views as appropriate.
- Take care to be as questioning or challenging of those with greater power as those without.
- Refrain from taking unfair advantage of a participant who is distressed or otherwise vulnerable.
- Don’t allow yourself to be pressured (subtly or otherwise) by any participants in a story, or by PR and media advisers. Make sure you haven’t strayed into making an implicit promise of favourable treatment in order to get an interview or story.

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Ask yourself:

- **Have I supplied the audience with the information they need to assess this story fairly?**
- **Have I supplied them with sufficient context to clearly understand that my talent is commenting from his or her particular point of view?**

Open-mindedness

Being open-minded means being open to evidence and arguments, irrespective of your personal views or predispositions, and this is the biggest personal challenge when it comes to impartiality. We all have opinions, shaped by instinct, belief and experience, and it may be very difficult to transcend these in the face of the stories you will work on. You have to work hard to be objective, and curiosity is one of the best qualities you can bring to bear on this.

You must also make sure that your editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, commercial or personal interests. If you feel there is any risk of a conflict between your personal and professional concerns, you should read the ABC policy on Conflict of Interest ([hyperlink](#)) and talk to your manager.

What can you do to encourage open-mindedness?

- Broaden the range of material you consume to both expand and challenge your horizons.
- Broaden your range of contacts and/or the people you approach for advice – the essence of impartiality is to understand all the significant and relevant perspectives on any issue.
- Be respectfully critical and sceptical of experts – their expertise may be very helpful to you, but no one specialist has all the answers, and a diversity of views is still required.
- Explore the intellectual arguments you might personally tend to ignore and do your best to understand why others believe in them.
- Be challenging of conventional wisdoms.

Ask yourself:

- **Have I done my best to be open-minded towards the merits of all positions?**
- **Have I questioned my own views and attitudes when approaching this story and weighing up the opinions of those involved?**
- **Have I distanced myself professionally from the story?**
- **Have I tried to look beyond an obvious narrative for this story?**

It's hard work, but this kind of discipline will make you a better journalist or content-maker.

Opportunities over time for principal relevant perspectives on matters of contention to be expressed

This is another area where it might be tempting to look for an easy formula, but once again it's a matter of complex judgement. As all content-makers know, not every significant strand of thought or belief can appear at once, nor can every perspective receive equal time, and nor can every facet of every argument be presented.

There are really two concepts in here – one is the timeframe and the other is 'principal, relevant viewpoints'.

Let's start with the **relevant viewpoints**:

For most stories, it will be fairly clear who the principal people or organisations are. They will probably include:

- **Authority:** The people who have legitimate power or authority to decide outcomes on the matter.
- **Experts:** People or bodies with recognised expertise in the matter to hand. These will include academics, leading business analysts and the like.
- **Influencers:** People with influence by virtue of their public standing or following, who have established a voice in the issue. For example, charitable organisations with experience in caring for the homeless.
- **Affected parties:** People or bodies whose interests will be affected by the outcome of a contentious matter.

This last category, 'affected interests' is a very important one to bear in mind. In dealing with some stories, the voices of people or communities without much power or media experience may be drowned out by those more skilled in media and PR. Where groups or individuals have a genuine stake in a story, we must be careful to include them. The vested and other interests of all parties must be properly researched and assessed, where practicable, before being included in your stories.

Finally, remember that relevant perspectives are not only political or cultural, but may include variations such as those between urban and rural, older and younger, male and female, established communities and new arrivals. Your story may warrant exploration of perspectives in different cultural communities, interest groups and geographic areas.

And now to **time**:

The ABC aims to present diverse perspectives over time in different ways, depending on whether we're talking about long-running or continuous output like daily current affairs programs (including those on Local Radio), 24-hours news channel, and news

online, a series of clearly linked or specialist programs dealing with the same or related issues or initiatives not linked to any other output.

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When dealing with highly contentious matters or when a decisive moment in relation to the contentious matter is expected, it will normally be necessary to present a range of relevant, principal perspectives in a clearly linked series of programs, or even a single item within a program or bulletin.

Election campaigns are an example of where the appropriate timeframe can be determined with a reasonable degree of precision. There is little point providing an opportunity to contribute after polling day, and failure to do so while the voters are making up their minds may have significant implications for whether the ABC is judged to have met the requirement for impartiality.

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In long running continuous output, a diversity of perspectives may be presented over time by the conscious and consistent application of editorial judgement in relevant subject areas. Any single piece of output – particularly a news item in a bulletin or a morning program – should be fair. But often, particularly with a breaking or developing story, it may be some time before it's possible to present the required diversity of perspectives. The refusal of one side in a story to offer any comment shouldn't be allowed to suppress reporting. An alert or news flash on a breaking story will often be a bald statement of what is known – and interpretation and response will come later. It may take time to persuade an important voice to take part in a public debate, or it may be that interpretation of an issue may shift and a different spectrum of views may become relevant.

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While it is the primary responsibility of editors and senior content managers in charge of output areas to ensure that, over time, all significant and relevant voices have been heard on an issue of contention, individual journalists and content-makers must also be aware of the cumulative effect of their work.

Conclusion

The impartiality of the ABC has been scrutinised throughout its history. Given the number of stories on contentious topics generated each day across the nation and overseas and now across multiple platforms, it is vital that we are all well-versed in the principles of impartial broadcasting and publication, and confident in putting them into practice.

The ABC has a fine track record in this regard, and it's up to all of us to maintain it.

You can do this by:

- becoming familiar with this Guidance Note;
- making use of other related guidance;
- discussing issues with your colleagues and during training;
- referring upwards.

Status of Guidance Note

This Guidance Note, authorised by the Managing Director, is provided to assist interpretation of the Editorial Policies to which the Guidance Note relates. The Editorial Policies contain the standards enforceable under the ABC's internal management processes and under the ABC's complaints handling procedures.

It is expected that the advice contained in Guidance Notes will normally be followed. In a given situation there may be good reasons to depart from the advice. This is permissible so long as the standards of the Editorial Policies are met. In such situations, the matter should ordinarily be referred upwards. Any mandatory referrals specified in Guidance Notes must be complied with.

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