

Review of the impartiality of BBC coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt.

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In April 2022 at the invitation of the BBC Board, we undertook to review the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt. A few points before we begin.

1. We've been informed by many pieces of evidence, and many conversations with many people, but the judgements here are entirely ours, so are the errors.
2. We use a wide-ranging definition of impartiality, which we refer to as broad impartiality (meaning inclusive). This is about more than left v. right politically. Bias can run in many directions, against many interests.
3. The work was long, but we tried to keep this part relatively short as we'd like it to be read.
4. Everyone we spoke to was helpful, thoughtful and candid, inside the BBC and out.
5. The material is vast. We had no choice but to focus on a few subjects. We hope the principles we find are of general use.
6. Contrary to some fears, almost nothing here is about stopping people saying things. It's overwhelmingly about saying more, more creatively.
7. We think our views are clear but it's for the BBC to decide how to respond given its other objectives, so we avoid a long list of recommendations.
8. We gave interviewees the option of anonymity so they could talk more freely. In the end, we decided just to label them 'internal' or 'external' to the BBC.
9. The period examined in detail by the review was October 2021 to March 2022 although in interviews we discussed matters outside this.

You can find more on the methods, terms of reference, etc., in the appendix, together with some of the research.

Our thanks to the small, superb team who assisted us and to all who answered our questions so generously. Some kindly said they found the discussions stimulating. If nothing else, we hope the exercise gave room for reflection.

Now to the review. We hope it helps.

Michael Blastland and Andrew Dilnot.

The aim of broad impartiality is right but means tough decisions about BBC coverage of fiscal policy.

Overall summary.

We found widespread appreciation for BBC coverage of tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt, and plenty to applaud. But against a test of broad impartiality, we also had concerns – about gaps and assumptions that put impartiality at risk.

These weaknesses can lead to output that appears to favour particular political positions, but curiously these lean left *and* right. That makes a charge of systematic political bias in this area hard to sustain. So while the risks to impartiality may look political, we think they need a better explanation, which is that they're really journalistic. This is no less serious and raises questions for the BBC and its journalists about what kind of journalism they want to do and how to do it. Inevitably, we focus on what could change. Much could apply at least equally to other UK media.

Summary of main findings.

We think the emphasis on broad impartiality in the BBC's response to the Serota Review timely and necessary. We found that significant interests and perspectives on tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt could be better served by BBC output and were not protected by a simpler model of political impartiality. We would not call this bias. But we don't see how BBC coverage can be described as always fair to different interests if it's unbalanced in this broad sense. This is an exacting and exciting ideal that drives much that follows.

'We want all editorial leaders in the BBC to recognise the challenge of serving an ever more diverse audience and to be part of our effort to bring a broader set of viewpoints and perspectives to the British public from across the whole UK.'

'This presents an opportunity to address the issue of impartiality in its broadest sense, pushing the debate beyond traditional left/right divides and addressing the challenge of audiences who do not currently feel their lives, attitudes and opinions are adequately represented or portrayed on the BBC. We will explore how new approaches and our mix of subjects, voices and tones could help to address this challenge.'

BBC Action Plan incorporating response to the Serota Review, Oct 2021.

We did not find evidence of wilful bias, but breaches of broad impartiality can arise nevertheless. For example...

- We think too many journalists lack understanding of basic economics or lack confidence reporting it. This brings a high risk to impartiality. In the period of this review, it particularly affected debt. Some journalists seem to feel instinctively that debt is simply bad, full stop, and don't appear to realise this can be contested and contestable.
- Several general assumptions seem to lurk like this either unnoticed or uncorrected. Others that outsiders observed in BBC coverage were: 'more public spending is good' and 'tax cuts are good.' Whilst these views might seem to make intuitive sense, all favour some interests above others.
- Above all they hide the trade-offs. You can't be impartial between competing demands for resources if you don't ask whether more over here means less over there. These trade-offs can seldom be known or specified completely, but they could be more explicitly acknowledged.
- One on-air statement from a BBC journalist said the UK government 'will have to...' We appreciate this was made live and might have been unintended. Still, BBC journalists should exercise extreme caution before suggesting a government 'will have to...' raise taxes, cut taxes, cut spending, raise spending, cut debt, raise debt, etc. – in any area. These are choices. They may be choices with reasonable arguments in their favour, so might the alternatives. It should be no surprise if people react badly when the BBC appears to take sides by saying a choice is a 'must'. Again, it's a lack of sensitivity to what's contestable and why.
- That example highlights a general problem. Too often, it's not clear from a report that fiscal policy decisions are also political choices; they're not inevitable, it's just that governments like to present them that way. The language of necessity takes subtle forms; if the BBC adopts it, it can sound perilously close to policy endorsement.
- We agree with the many interviewees who said an elephant in the room is politics. Close attention to politics feels as though it ought to nurture impartiality. We find that without similarly close attention to the economics, it can be a threat to impartiality. Politically-led news is vulnerable to groupthink, just as politics itself can become a bandwagon, while other perspectives, perhaps from other specialists, speaking to the interests of other groups, are overlooked or crowded out.

- We think, for this and other reasons, that broad interests that lack political salience can be neglected. The taxpaying interests of people on low incomes and whole areas of the UK where incomes tend to be low are a striking example of this neglect. We think it fails the test of broad impartiality.
- We find in the BBC, like so many other media outlets, an occasional temptation to hype – and we think hype an impartiality issue. We don't want to be bored either, but see breathless stories or headlines that seem to chase excitement by slanting data or evidence.
- Economics can be uncertain – that's one reason it means choices. We're not sure the extent of this uncertainty is always appreciated or reported. Overlook it, and you can distort the choices. Sometimes, a clear, simple story is easier to tell and follow (and sell), which feels like a reason to avoid talking about uncertainty. This is a risk to impartiality.
- Sometimes, problems can be fixed simply by injecting a little context into an interview, to bring assumptions to the surface and make sure they're challenged, to bring out a trade-off, to bring hype down to earth with a little proportion, and so on. But once again, to know what context you need it helps to be on top of the subject.
- All the above raise questions about how to ensure the BBC's contributors, its choice and treatment of stories, represent sufficiently broad interests and perspectives. We think it might help to give non-political specialists and programmes more agency to decide what's important, and to see this as a stronger obligation. Specialists tend to be most aware of what's out there, but even they could explore it more systematically. Current Affairs and Factual programmes often have the advantage of a little more time. The question is most difficult in News.
- Specialist journalists were mostly more than willing to accept more responsibility to try to widen the BBC's horizons. They thought this could help serve broad impartiality. We agree. But some journalists saw obstacles, and others had objections. These are to do with journalistic risk, trust, and how news is defined. They confront the BBC with a choice about what kind of journalistic organisation it wants to be.
- We were disturbed by how many people said they didn't understand the coverage. In our audience research, most had no comment about impartiality on fiscal policy because they didn't know what the stories meant (Scottish audiences felt a little more informed). Lower socio-economic

groups tend to be worst affected, but not only those. Should broad impartiality concern itself with the extent to which different groups find the coverage accessible? We think it should. That leaves the BBC with a creative challenge: how to mix more engaging explanation into its coverage of economics and the political debate around economics.

- There was just one, possibly concerted complaint on a theme already mentioned. Otherwise, complaints to the BBC about impartiality on fiscal policy usually allege excessive interruption by interviewers, or too much attention to certain subjects and why don't they talk about x (where x is another subject altogether). These tend to be only incidentally related to fiscal policy. We've nothing to add to the BBC's understanding of these issues, and again don't feel confident of being able to show robustly that they're a problem more in one direction than another.
- We did not find evidence of bias on fiscal policy in BBC staff's use of social media, but we're concerned that they sometimes skate on thin ice with people's perceptions.
- We didn't find evidence that BBC coverage of fiscal policy is overall too left or right – because we can't. Others might think the answer obvious, we do not. We doubt the methods available are equal to the task, not with any statistical robustness. These methods would, without a truly vast amount of time and expense, themselves be at risk of bias. In any case, we think it more useful if we're specific.
- We looked briefly at health care in Drama as an example of non-News output relating to tax, spending, etc. Audiences were relaxed about impartiality in drama. That characters express views that would have a journalist sacked is as it should be, so although we found examples of this, individually they gave us no concern. The test can be couched as one of imaginative range: over time, across various, different health dramas, does BBC Drama realize a reasonable range of perspectives, including political perspectives? It would be heroically absurd to try to mandate these by numbers - and coming from a pair who don't make drama the question might be uninformed, one reason we didn't look at it in any detail and don't hazard an answer. The BBC could consider reviewing impartiality in drama separately, with people who know the issues and conventions better than we do.

Findings in more detail.

One of the first things we found was surprise. Several smart people asked: ‘Why this subject? It’s a side-issue, surely?’ Anyway, isn’t it a bit dull, said others.

On top of which, most thought the output good (we agree). There was huge appreciation for its quality, seriousness, and especially the strengths of specialists. In all, not much to see here, some said.

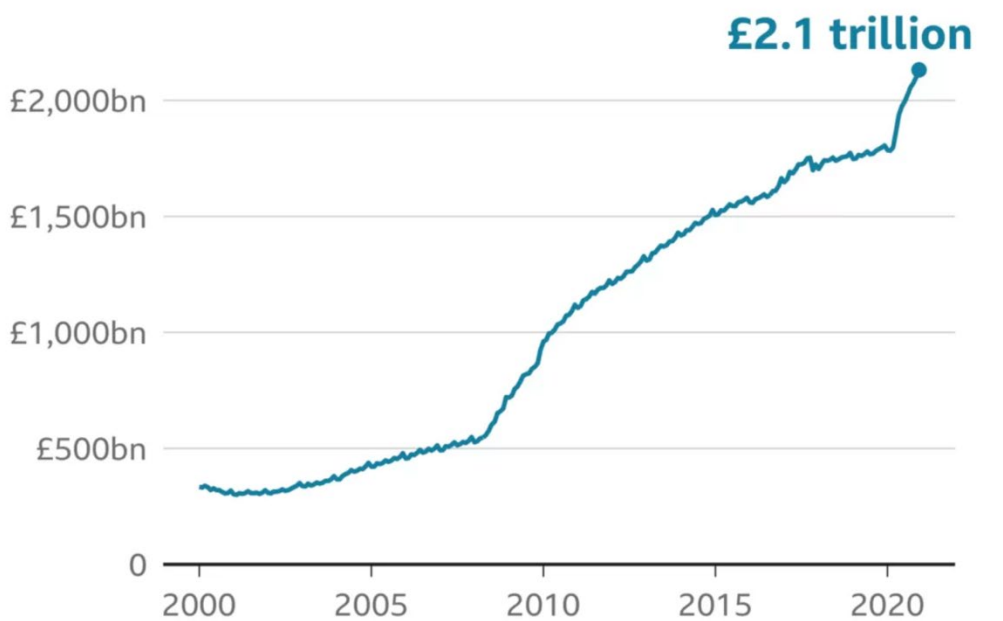
That felt instructive. It suggests it’s worth asking questions even if you can’t immediately think of any problems. You never know what might turn up.

1. Framing and understanding

Here's a chart. It’s about debt – but it’s also about how the BBC can shape economic and political perceptions, intentionally or not.

UK public sector net debt

Excluding public sector banks



Source: Office for National Statistics

BBC

The chart looks alarming, but the source is the ONS so maybe that’s just how it is. We see an impartiality hazard light. None of the numbers here is wrong, exactly, but if you don’t see the problem, especially if you’re a journalist, you really should read on.

We think it illustrates several points.

First, a lack of understanding. We suspect this is common and think it brings a high risk to impartiality and can lead to the appearance of bias. Journalists need to know what's contestable and why (specialists generally do), lest they take arguable positions and assume they're fact or that all right-thinking people agree.

Second, we think the chart reveals a latent assumption about debt, suggesting such assumptions – there are others – can go unchallenged, inviting the question 'Is there enough diversity of view?'

Third, we think part of the problem is to do with how politics dominates news.

But if the numbers are not wrong, what's the problem? The problem is there are different ways of framing them. Let's look at what makes this frame contentious. (Note that our discussion of the arguments does not mean we endorse any of them.)

The chart seems to show a huge and almost relentless rise in debt. At the top is a number in bold: £2.1 trillion. All this is presumably big and bad. At least, we think that's what we're meant to think.

And what's wrong with that?

First, the rise is reported in £s. Is this adjusted for inflation? Can't immediately tell. If not, the rise will tend to be exaggerated.

More fundamentally, to know how serious a debt is, you'd usually compare it with your income. It's not hard to see why economists do this: if you struggle to pay the bills, owing £100 might be bad, but what if you're Elon Musk? £s alone don't tell you how serious a debt is unless you also know about the resources to finance it. And just as you'd compare your own debt to your own income, so national debt over time is usually best compared to the national income (or GDP). National income changes – both because of price changes (inflation) and economic growth (or lack of it). If national income grows, which it usually does, the same sum of debt will become a smaller percentage of it and generally less worrying. That is, the state can usually cope with more debt as it grows richer, just like you (though interest rates also matter). These changes aren't trivial: without adjusting for inflation, GDP is now more than twice as high as in 2000 and four times as high as mid 1989. Ignore this when you report debt and that's another exaggeration of how serious it is.

'If the real interest rate is lower than the real rate of growth... in principle you can run deficits – primary budget deficits – and still see the debt to GDP ratio falling.'
(*External*).

The point is that looking at debt as a % of GDP can give a very different impression from looking at it in £s, and economists don't tend to choose £s. Then why did the BBC? In this case, £s make the rise in debt overall look far bigger, and also risk distorting when and how it grew.

Still, it did go up, even as a share of GDP. Did it go through the roof? Depends where you think the roof is. This too is fiercely contested by economists. As a % of national income, debt stands at about 100%. After the end of the Second World War it reached 250%. That is, different historical frames give a different sense of 'high' and 'low'. So why this time frame? Again, it tends to make things look about as bad as any time frame could.

A case can be made that 1946 is too long ago to be relevant. Anyway, 1946 was in the aftermath of a huge economic emergency. A counter case can be made that Covid and the global financial crisis were also huge economic emergencies, and that makes 1946 precisely relevant.

Perhaps alarm about debt is justified because 'equal to 100% of income' is nevertheless bad. Then how about 260%? That's about the position in Japan now. How about 450%? That's what many of us could borrow from a bank or building society for a house. But if you think 450% is worth it for you, why is 100% for the nation bad? There are plausible answers to that, but are the arguments heard? And bear in mind that, unlike you, the nation does not retire or die but expects a stream of income more or less forever, so arguably need never clear its debts entirely.

Maybe the debt is bad because debt just is. You'd rather be in credit than debt. But is it bad? It can be ruinous for countries as for people, but not necessarily. One consideration is what you're borrowing for. Another is that the alternative to debt might be worse. Many economists argue that debt can be positively good when it enables us to invest in productive capacity for the future, or if it spreads the cost of an economic shock (like Covid-19 or a war).

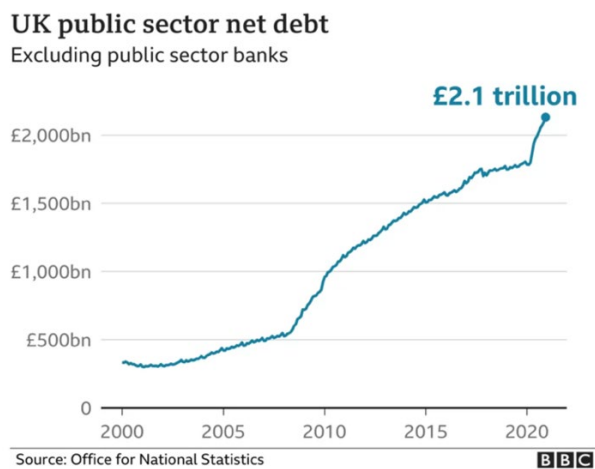
Our point is not to argue these views are definitive, or that debt is not a problem, or that more is right. It's to show why some people might reasonably think so. And some experts do think so. Others think UK debt too high, worrying that the trend is unsustainable, fearing an adverse reaction by the financial markets and/or a sudden and sustained rise in interest rates. They're anxious that the government should be seen to have a credible policy to stop the debt running out of control. These too are reasonable arguments. The simple point is that there's expert debate about the safe or sensible level of national debt, and how worrying it now is.

That being so, the BBC should beware implying a view. To us, this chart implies a view: 'it's bad' – maybe without anyone realising this is contested, perhaps in the belief a big, bad angle is better, *i.e.* 'It's bad, and right now it's really bad... great story!' If we wanted to present the data in the most alarming way we could, we might start with something like this chart.

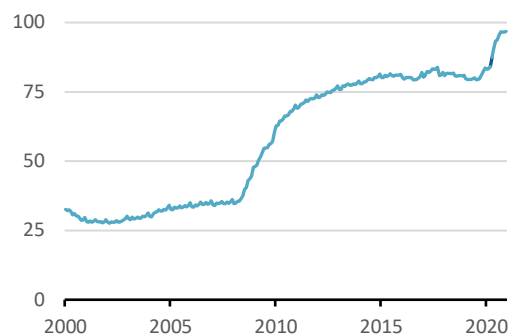
That's not impartial, no more than it would be impartial if the BBC said the debt was nothing to worry about. Bear in mind that the seriousness of public debt has been a central political issue since the 2010 General Election.

Next, three framings of public debt to show the difference they make.

A) The BBC chart, in £s, showing debt rising almost relentlessly, by 6 or 7 times from low to high.



B) Same debt, same period, this time as % of GDP. Relative rise now almost halved (about x3.5). Now shows periods of relative stability, and two jumps, not a relentless rise, the biggest after the global financial crisis, another with Covid.



C) One more as a % of GDP, this time over a longer period, with the chosen BBC period underlined.

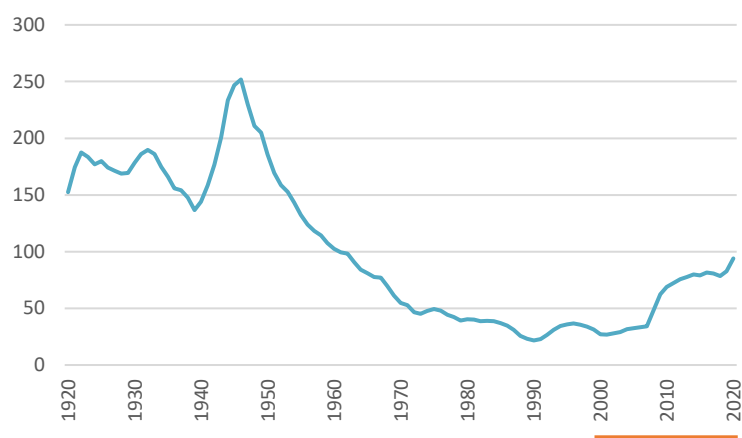


Chart C, or something like it, has appeared on the BBC. But we've often seen A on its own.

Are we making too much of one chart? Or does the lack of understanding here go wider – contributing to an anti-debt stance generally? We think the latter. We found examples of excellent reporting, well-informed and even-handed. There's no question senior specialists know the issues. But we found other examples that still seem to lean towards 'debt bad'.

A description of the debt as 'eye-watering' is an old example critics still cite – a contested view, stated as fact. Some journalists told us they understand this now. Many external interviewees said the problem persists, and we agree. 'Busting the overdraft' strikes us as another loaded phrase we saw not long ago. A recent explainer said: 'Recent governments have pledged to keep the national debt under control, by which they mean it gets smaller over time compared to the overall size of the economy.' Whilst it's fair to say this is what recent governments might mean, it would be useful to point out that it's a contested interpretation of what 'under control' might mean to others. We've seen cash levels of borrowing described – debatably – as a 'record' ('record' or 'highest since records began' is a repeated irritant for all kinds of statistics. Not least, some of these records didn't begin long ago, and there are usually other data sources that could give a longer, better perspective – see, for example, recent reports about 'record' food price rises that weren't). Another recent piece said: 'Jeremy Hunt... needs to find billions of pounds of savings to keep the UK's debt under control...' Many agree. Many also disagree, for various reasons. So what is it that prevents some journalists from realising that this looks like policy endorsement? That's how it reads to us. 'Jeremy Hunt says he needs to find...' is all it would take to avoid the problem, another reason to suspect journalists don't always realise there is one.

We think the root of this is not bias but insufficient awareness of the choices and debates here. Bluntly, debt is controversial. In the period we studied, too many BBC journalists appear not to have known how.

'How high should borrowing go is partly a quasi-technical, feasibility question which depends on interest rates and growth rates, but it's also partly a normative question about political judgments.' (*External*).

'There is now an increasing mainstream view that it's not just the size of your debt that matters and there are costs to not borrowing, particularly if your economy is not at full capacity. And that is really important because the decision not to borrow has real life implications for people in terms of investment in things like living standards, in terms of our response to long-term challenges like climate, etcetera, etcetera. So it feels like the reporting is reinforcing a frame that takes us to a set of policy choices that there isn't an objective interrogation of, but have huge implications for people.' (*External*).

Let's hammer the point: this does not mean we advocate going the other way and saying debt doesn't matter, or that a government has carte blanche. Its choices usually entail risks on all sides. We're saying there's serious argument, no more. To be impartial, journalists need to understand this. Even if they don't know the detail, it helps to know where the dragons are. The BBC has expertise in this area and could make more use of it.

A temptation a short while ago might have been to map this to a bias against a recent Conservative government. But usually, the case for more debt or borrowing has come from the left. To assume that this is therefore a bias against left or right is, to us, not the most productive starting point. We think the main issue is lack of impartiality caused by uninformed groupthink and lack of confidence to challenge arguments, often given an extra twist by hype.

Fiscal policy is at the centre of any nation's choices. All BBC journalists are likely to bump into it at some point. We find that many feel intimidated, wary of anything economic. This isn't new; it's well known. It remains unaddressed.

'Because fiscal policy – and economic policy in general - is quite a technical subject... you have this phenomenon whereby the politician will take advantage of the ignorance... the lack of preparedness or the fact that the journalist is not an economist or a fiscal expert and throw out stuff that, although it's demonstrably not true... they say it and it's not picked up in real time and then they'll do... five different interviews...' (External)

The only defence for non-specialists is to know their limits and ask for help when they need it. But even senior journalists have shown they don't always know when they need it. If journalists don't know the arguments, they're likely to revert to what one called their 'resting state' – not a deliberate bias, but a set of presumptions. Never underestimate the BBC's resting state, she said.

One journalist said to us: *'We're a sort of team of arts graduates, basically.'* It was said with a smile of just one team – and doesn't do justice to the effort they make to keep up to speed – but contains enough truth to leave them feeling vulnerable.

'There aren't nearly enough people in and around newsrooms who have any experience of... running businesses, making payroll, you know, doing a tax return that isn't just filling in the numbers of your PAYE certificate. That's a failure across all journalism.' (External)

Our last point about knowing what's contestable is you realise how much more you could say – across all forms of content. That makes the subject richer. Understanding where the arguments are is both journalistic responsibility and opportunity.

Note on household analogies.

That states don't tend to retire or die, or pay off their debts entirely, is one way national debt is not like household or personal debt, not like a credit card for example, and why analogies with household debt, or suggestions the government must 'pay off' or 'pay down' the debt can cause intense debate. Clearly, pithy, accessible metaphors are valuable to journalists and audiences. And 'paying off' is a tempting phrase even to those who know the arguments because it seems to express the idea there must be some degree of discipline over debt, even for a state. We just used a household analogy by saying mortgage debt equal to 100% of income would not usually induce fear. But again, it helps to know that household analogies are dangerous territory, intensely contested, and can easily mislead.

Note on hype.

'What's the best line?' is an old journalistic test of newsworthiness. But looking for the best line in dubious uses of 'record', or contestable framings for the sake of impact, or describing the smallest percentage change as a 'surge' when it could be measurement error is not just selling the story, it's a threat to impartiality. It strengthens one perspective against another by making it more dramatic; ditto selecting only the bad angle. This ought to be obvious.

'That is a source of irritation to me, and this links very closely to the 'we-don't-know-about-series-that-go-back-into-the-past, we-will-rely-on-this-short-run-ONS-view.' So the phrase that really gets me is 'since records began', which is used a lot on the BBC and everywhere else, and can sometimes be quite misleading... I think this is an element of a search for headlines and so on.' *(External)*

We can make most numbers look big and bad if we try. The point is, should an impartial BBC be trying? We come back to fiscal policy as a world of choices, where this data is the kind of evidence used to justify them. Hype the evidence and you prejudice the choice.

In particular, journalists could be less willing to take political hype at its word. Politicians like saying their latest act or thought is a big deal. BBC journalists should not buy it just because it seems to make a better story. Once again, it borders on policy endorsement. They could ask themselves if they're being played with an appeal to their cruder instincts.

'[Don't] report inside source material as fact.' *(External)*

Likewise, 'crisis' is not just a good headline, it's a political and economic judgement. Our impression is that the BBC, like others, is tempted by hype and bad news. It could reflect on the risks to impartiality. If you think that's a recipe for boring journalism, maybe also reflect on the appeal of not necessarily running with the pack, that sometimes there can be a good story, a more original story – and the right story – in challenging other people's hyperbolic framing.

In general, we think the BBC has made big strides in its use of data. Journalists are more alert to the hazards, the Statistics Editor, Reality Check, advice from the ONS, data-journalism teams etc., have all contributed to a healthier culture. But it doesn't catch everything, so it's a case of remaining vigilant and maintaining these efforts. The data issues we spotted largely originated with other problems, we think, like lack of awareness, not enough uncertainty (see below) or the temptation to hype.

2. Political framing

Is politics partly responsible for what we see as a dominant set of assumptions about debt? Does it crowd out other points of view? After 2010, neither Labour nor the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took public positions in favour of higher borrowing and debt. One respected academic who did, and says he was far from alone, argues that an anti-debt sentiment in the media took hold at that time. That is, the politics began in his view to distort economic reporting.

One of the hardest tasks set by the BBC's commitment to due impartiality is to decide what constitutes a reasonable range of views. The views from Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and Stormont heavily influence that judgement. Many people told us that the political perspective dominates news coverage, shaping the agenda, limiting time for other stories, dictating certain kinds of formulaic narrative ('the government says... the opposition says... business reacted by...'). And so it should, said others: this reflects where decisions are made, this is what affects people's lives.

But people's lives can be affected whether politics talks about them or not. It's clear to us that political perspectives can be partial, neglecting others. Political journalists can likewise miss or misunderstand or underweight economic perspectives. We could simply say that's why the BBC has other specialists. But if they're all bound from the outset to work within a political frame that shapes the choice of subjects, interviewees, the running order, the line of questioning and the shape of the story – perhaps squeezing it into binary politics - how much can other specialists really exercise influential judgement? A risk is the BBC overlooks interests that lack current political salience.

'The agenda is often set by the government, the Chancellor or the budget. And whatever they say is what we talk about. We don't tend to ask: what *should* they have done, what *needed* to be done that was done, rather than here was a penny on this here was a penny off that, what does it mean?' (*External*).

An example from Northern Ireland. The limited tax raising powers in Stormont are part of a context that means fiscal argument is dominated by demands for more money for public spending from Westminster. The BBC's correspondents know the issue well. They recognise that a counterbalancing interest in the level of tax is largely divorced from the demand for spending, and often politically neglected. But if these journalists tried to shift that balance, they might look perverse in their community.

‘The biggest pitfall for us is there is, as far as I can see, a different political consensus about tax and spend in Northern Ireland than there is in the rest of the UK and England ... in that if you look at the five main political parties at Stormont... none of them are ideologically to the Right, I would say, in a fiscal sense. ...if you look at their policy positions they are very much in favour of increasing public spending as and when they get the opportunity.’ (*Internal*).

So where does due impartiality lie on issues of tax and spending when a community’s politics are dominated by one political frame – for more public spending? Do we say the politics defines the debate by definition, or accept it can miss things and could sometimes be broadened? We think the latter (though we acknowledge the risks). Political attitudes in Westminster to debt have similarly converged again recently. More examples in a moment.

‘In seeking to achieve kind of cross-party representation, you can actually inadvertently get ideological bias if those parties are... speaking in the same terms in a way that conforms with the current dominant ideology,’ (*External*).

‘*The Westminster frame on things is the elephant in the room here,*’ said one senior journalist, who argued that the political angle of the day often determines coverage whether the specialist judges it significant or not. ‘*Once you set that ball rolling...*’ said another, who argued that a Westminster announcement obliged him to serve up a predictable set of reactions. Correspondents in the Nations felt similar pressures.

‘Lots of people *think* they understand politics; lots of people *know* they don’t understand economics. And that gives a comfort to, ‘Oh well, George Osborne is saying that because of x, y, z and Rishi Sunak is doing that because of this and this, and he doesn’t get on with Boris Johnson and they don’t like Penny Mordaunt.’ And it’s a far easier narrative when the challenge of actually explaining in an engaging way why money matters and how it works really matters has got to be a unique function of BBC News.’ (*External*).

We think the BBC could look beyond the politically salient framings more often, live up to its developing view that impartiality is a broad remit, be less predictably reactive, and give more licence and agency to its in-house experts to explore other perspectives and subjects and decide what matters. There could at least be an experiment or two, one editor said, to see what difference it makes to hand a story from the outset to the economics editor, say. There would be risks – including being accused of elevating the BBC’s own biases – and not all journalists agree. We discuss this in the section on journalistic risks.

'Political editors are being asked to be experts in the economy, macro-economics, the Constitution, trade, law, political negotiations and who's up and who's down in four different administrations and nobody can do that. The only possible result of asking a political editor to front all of those things is they look foolish.' *(External)*

However, this argument only really gains traction if there's evidence BBC journalism is under-reporting substantial interests and perspectives. Debt is one example. Are there others? Yes.

3. Whose interests are missing?

Thinking about a broad definition of impartiality, one question we asked was ‘are people’s diverse interests proportionately represented in BBC coverage?’ There’s no perfect measure of that, but we think we can observe misalignments. What gets talked about can obscure big interests that don’t, bringing risks to impartiality by omission. A striking example is VAT.

In Wales, more VAT is paid than income tax, ditto North East England. In fact, a large proportion of the whole UK population pays more VAT than income tax. For a great many households across the country, VAT is the biggest tax and so to them you might say the most important. More than one third of UK adults pay no income tax at all, but they do pay VAT. The table shows the dramatically different tax interests of selected parts of the UK.

Nation / Region	Income Tax	VAT
North-East England	£4.5bn	£5.1bn
Wales	£5.4bn	£6.0bn
London	£50.4bn	£22.7bn

Source:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/datasets/countryandregionalpublicsectorfinancesrevenueables>

(Before VAT rebates. Deduct those and North East England and Wales VAT becomes similar to income tax, though for most people there VAT will still be the bigger tax. Note that experience in London will be especially diverse.)

What determines this is people’s relative income and spending. For high incomes, income tax is likely to dominate; for lower incomes, VAT. That is, these groups have different tax interests. But which tax is more talked about? Which interest is most served by political argument and BBC coverage?

We think income tax knocks VAT out of the park in this respect, meaning the tax interest of the better-off gets more attention. It’s true that isolated elements of VAT, on fuel or energy (or Cornish pasties) for example, sometimes become prominent, but mostly VAT is reported from a business perspective, for example as an issue for the hospitality industry.

'I think that is definitely true – the tax debate is way too income tax focused. And that's because the group-think is tax is income tax. So you're right in Wales, the North-East [of England] and others, the discussion on tax is skewed.' (*External*).

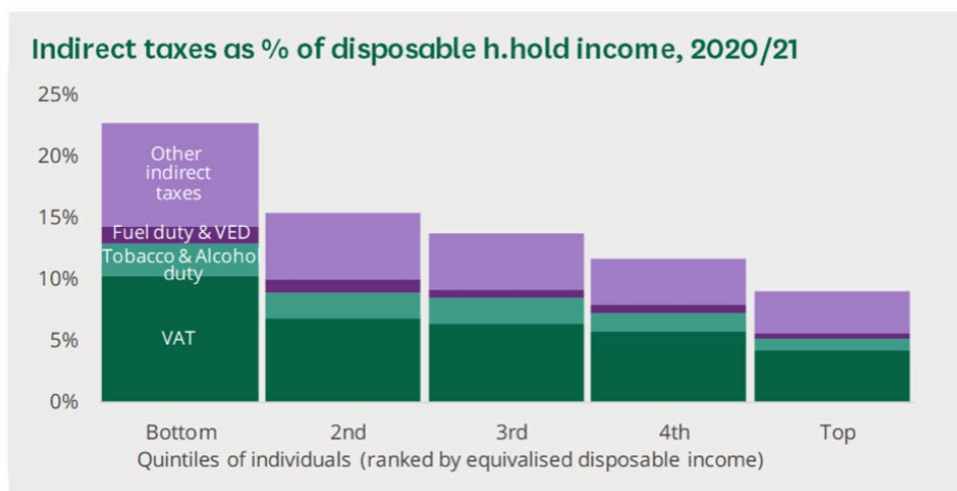
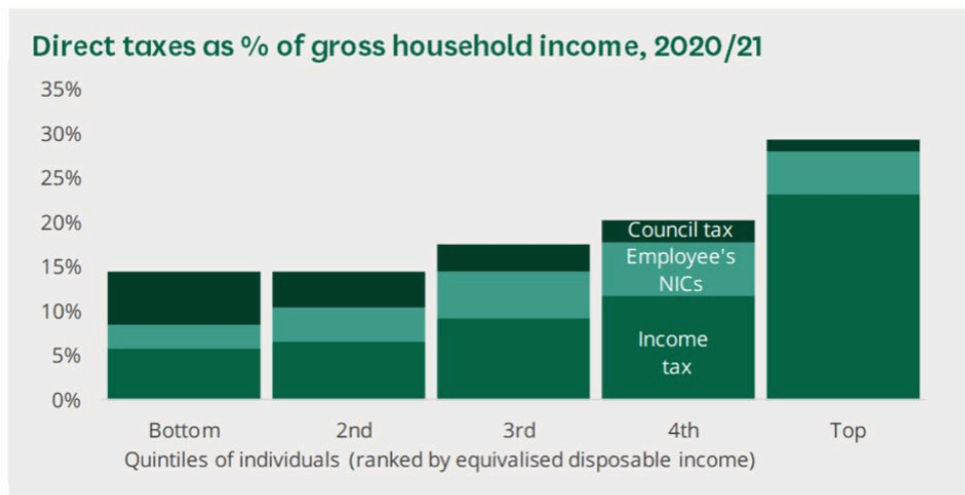
'Anyone who works in the areas of fiscal policy will think that people are overly focused on income tax.' (*Second external*)

Asked about this imbalance in the coverage of VAT, many interviewees went silent for a moment, then said things like: '*Interesting... never really thought about it. Yes.*'

How is it that the biggest number for a large proportion of the audience isn't seen that way? The one exception was a think-tank in Wales, which says it struggles to be heard outside Wales. We didn't look at council tax but suspect it's similarly underweighted for some audiences.

So does the BBC fail to show impartiality between the tax interests of people on different incomes, implying some matter more than others? Can this mean neglect of the tax interest of whole nations or regions where incomes tend to be lower? We think in this respect there's a case to answer. In general, the effects on different income levels of any tax change are well-reported – at every Budget there'll be charts and discussion about who gains or loses overall according to income (though we don't tend to see analysis by Region – and we could). But the importance in this of VAT is neglected.

Below, the radically different tax interests of different parts of the population by income.



Source:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8513/> and ONS: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/theeffectsoftaxesandbenefitsonhouseholdincome/financialyearending2021>

(Note that these two charts from the House of Commons Library use slightly different scales, so the apparent size of the blocks can't be directly compared without reference to the scale. Note too that one chart shows direct tax as a share of gross income, the other indirect tax as a share of *disposable* income. What they do illustrate nicely is the variety of tax interests.)

You could say this relative neglect of VAT is because not much usually happens to it, but isn't that itself to accept a political *status quo*? It also raises the issue of how the BBC informs audiences about relevant background – which you might prefer to call education not news, which might in turn have implications for where the BBC does it. Education or not, it could easily find its way into an interviewer's questions.

Note that we have looked at these taxes from only two perspectives: income and place. You could also look at them according to age, ethnicity, gender... Broad impartiality between audience interests can be a very large canvass.

Total references to VAT in scope for studied period across radio and TV: **466**. Of which **148** were significant mentions (almost all from a business perspective or about fuel and energy), of which **1** addressed VAT and lower incomes directly. (*Content Analysis*).

So it's again worth asking what frames the coverage, and again politics plays a part. When the UK government talks about tax cuts, for example, it does not usually mean VAT, and the media absorbs that framing without sufficient question.

Similarly, a political announcement about tax gets attention; changes over time that might affect people more, often don't.

'When the government made the decision to take child benefit away from a group of higher rate taxpayers, that got a lot of attention, and it was then made more generous to make sure ... it wasn't clawed away from as many people as that policy would have intended. And those thresholds of where it was clawed away, they've... just been left frozen for more than a decade now, and in fact the policy is now as ungenerous as initially intended. And it's that initial announcement that got all of the attention, plus the revisions to that announcement, and yet there's hardly any attention over the subsequent period... There's a whole load of other things in the tax and benefit system where that's true, which don't get anywhere near as much focus because there's not a key moment where, I guess, a politician's putting their name to it. (*External*).

While there's no doubt the political frames need reporting, they easily dominate, and this is a risk to broad impartiality. In general, just because we include what blue, red, yellow, orange and green said this week does not make coverage impartial between the nations' varied interests.

'There are very few BBC presenters who will be brave enough to frame questions to a politician that aren't essentially articulating the views of another politician.' (*Internal*)

Another example which loses out for a different reason is coverage of public spending on buses. Bus travel is, for a great many people, all there really is. There are more journeys by bus than any other form of public transport, and these services are significantly shaped by public spending through concessionary fares, subsidies, etc. But trains and planes receive more attention. Why might that be, do you think?

'It's not that it's wrong to talk about income tax or the fairness or otherwise of freezing thresholds and all of that. Of course it's not wrong. But it's about emphasis and overly emphasising something that is outwardly important to a disproportionate amount of the people who are making this journalism versus it being of less importance to significant quantities of our audiences... In other words, to address both of those examples directly, they are income taxpayers who probably disproportionately get to work on a train.' *(Internal)*

Not least, trains can mean big, shiny new railways. Buses can admittedly be tricky to report, as they might be many different stories, not one. They're also thought boring. They're sometimes covered by local BBC services, but rare on national news. Transport specialists know all this. They'd like to do more but struggle to be heard. But from an impartiality perspective 'not worth it because it's hard to cover and boring,' doesn't cut it. Boring to you, maybe, if you don't take the bus. Make them interesting – they're of interest to passengers. 'Boring' is another of those judgments that doesn't feel like it matters to impartiality but can mean neglect for big interests.

We also looked at prisons and penal policy – as an area of public spending probably less immediately attractive to the population as a whole but typically still thought important. What we found seemed broadly consistent with other areas, not least, plenty of appreciation outside the BBC. But there was also a feeling, markedly from journalists, that it was hard to get certain types of story on air, especially those explaining policy trade-offs or tackling important subjects that aren't thought appealing. An example was policy on the probation service, which has seen huge change in recent years.

'Probation is this invisible service. It doesn't have a place, it doesn't have a location. And I can't pretend that we've ever covered probation well... And yet it's been an absolute disaster area. Completely. It is staggering the amount of waste and wasted human lives.' *(Internal)*.

Compare this, they said, with the appetite for stories about repeat offences by those released on parole. Some worried about the pressure to attract audiences, whether online or on-air, and that this makes it harder to educate and explain. Of course, you educate no one if no one's watching or listening – that's the perennial BBC challenge. But the need to rise to it gains force from broad impartiality.

'You have to kind of address the thing that you started with: do people really care that much about it? And I think that's all about explaining to people why they might want to care.' *(Internal)*.

'My stomach turns slightly at the idea that we decide what stories go, particularly on Online but also beyond that, based on what people are searching for on Google. Because if you are writing stories about what people are searching for on Google, by definition you're not telling people about the things they don't know they ought to know about. I know that the BBC editorial values aren't only based on that these days. But it used to be that there were lots of thrusting young journalists in the BBC who wanted to do kind of popular journalism, and there were a few kind of wise heads who were like, 'Yeah, no, fine. But listen, let's make sure we also do this.' And my gut is that those wise heads are not there or not vocal at the moment.' *(Internal)*.

We heard several times from the non-political specialists we spoke to that the weight of politics distorts their subject and constrains their range. Is this just a professional turf war? We don't think so. If we're right, it's a concern for broad impartiality. Does it also hint at missed opportunities for stories?

'We're about to have an extra 20,000 prison places. We ought to do a piece about this and understand the costs of it and actually look where these prisons are going to be built and what kind of people are going to be inside them. The chances of us getting something like that through the commissioning group, under the current sort of thinking, I suspect would be quite small.' *(Internal)*.

For years, mental health (and mental health spending) was one of these under-served subjects. We're told GP services (primary care) are under-reported versus hospitals (we didn't look closely, and we're aware some hospital consultants take an opposite view about where more money should go). Of course, any claim to air-time etc. will be weighed against every other, and time is usually short, but the cumulative effect can be to squeeze out big interests which seem never quite big enough to displace the Westminster / Holyrood / Cardiff Bay / Stormont story of the day, or the story that's easier to tell, or more familiar, or has better pictures, or a better 'line', etc.

'I think it is important that there is a singular version of impartiality which stems from politics, which is understandable, and that will be the most important frame of reference. But I do feel it has unintended consequences which can stifle plurality... And people don't realise it. And I think the BBC, you know, also would be a much more kind of vibrant place if we were really a kind of liquid marketplace of ideas and treatments of any particular position.' *(Internal)*.

News judgment is complicated, tries to satisfy many objectives, and we appreciate the difficulty of allocating scarce resources to the many claims for attention. The argument about the weight of politics in these decisions is an old one. Contrary to our own position, some think the argument largely settled by a few simple realities...

'The reality is that politicians are the decision makers. I would love there to be better broadcast coverage of business news, and... I think the level of economic literacy in our teams could be better, but much of news is the jeopardy around decision making which is done in SW1... I've been party to quite a lot of discussions over the years about doing 'less green bench' - but we can't ignore reality about the centre of power however much we should have broad sensibilities and be aware that the limits of the fashionable orthodoxy are just that - fashionable!' (*Internal*).

And of course, MPs have been voted for, journalists haven't.

We understand that point of view, we're just not sure it's enough anymore – if it ever was. We're not proposing to ignore the centre of power (remembering there are several); we're saying the centre can itself lack broad impartiality so, if that's your benchmark, so will you. It can be highly selective, and what should the BBC do about that? What this review tries to add is the difference made by a broader definition of impartiality between different interests, in addition to the balance between the front benches.

To us, this is central. If the coverage underweights a big interest of those on low incomes or bus users and so on, or under-represents a common expert view about debt, or fails to see what's happening to people in the longer term because of a focus on the political theme of the day, or (see below) implies some people should have more resources than others – then regardless of what the front benches in politics are saying, is the coverage impartial? We think not.

4. Trade-offs

If the BBC has a 'debt bad' tendency, does it also have a 'spending good' tendency? Some outsiders said an emphatic 'yes!'

'...there seems to be a belief that there's a sort of bottomless pot of gold and something must be done. And the unspoken assumption, nearly always unspoken, is that a government intervention is the natural and obvious way to solve a particular social problem... *(External)*.

'I have a slight worry that the BBC, when I think about public spending perhaps in particular, leans towards a view that thinks public spending on public services is a slightly unquestioned good thing.' *(Another external)*.

'The BBC, I think, is trapped in a narrative of every problem is solved by extra government spending or by new government policies. That is its broad narrative.' *(Third External)*.

Again, our own view about the right level of public spending is irrelevant. It's enough to say it's contested in every area, it affects different people in different ways, with well-established economic thought on all sides, while different governments and countries choose different levels and priorities.

And yet one critic of the BBC's coverage in this respect said it turned public spending into a shopping list, and another felt able to describe the typical BBC story about public spending like this: here's a vivid and emotionally compelling 'need', or 'failure', here's how much more money a few other carefully chosen countries spend on this need, here's how much better results are in those countries, therefore (it's implied) more public spending is the answer. He particularly singled out coverage of spending on the NHS. NHS problems, he said, are presented as spending problems, as are many others. If spending is the frame with which an analysis begins, more spending will often be the unsurprising answer the analysis produces.

'If you are discussing the future of the NHS, the starting point and the way the debate will be framed is: 'Isn't it chronically under-resourced? Spending hasn't increased as much as it did under Tony Blair.' That will be the framing of it all. Not, well, we're now joined for a debate about the NHS and actually whether the Dutch privatised system is considerably better than the NHS and whether we should adopt it. But that's never been the way a debate on health care has been framed, I don't think, on a BBC discussion that I've had about health policy...' *(External)*.

Is this fair? Is it a bias in favour of public spending? Several people inside the BBC also felt there was truth in the 'spending good' criticism. We too saw examples that seemed to conform.

One answer we heard was *'But where's the political party saying: 'Cut the NHS?'* Another might be that the NHS has overwhelming public support; another answer to the charge that there's a 'spending good' tendency was: *'But what's wrong with that? More public spending pays for things people want – of course it's talked of positively.'*

Our judgement is that what's most lacking here is a stronger sense of the trade-offs. In practice, more for some often means less for others – either lower public spending elsewhere, or lower private spending because of higher taxes to pay for higher public spending. Once we acknowledge this, 'more' spending ceases to be uncontestedly positive or even neutral. It has positives *and* negatives for different people. The same goes for 'less tax', as neither is impartial between competing demands but favours the demand on the table. 'More spending' or 'less tax' can feel vaguely nice for everyone. But if 'more' is reported favourably, while the 'less' it implies somewhere else is ignored, is that impartial? Of course, trade-offs invite arguments about what's fair, and what's the best or right use of the money, in which case, let it be argued.

Health care is full of trade-offs. They're in every argument about every service reconfiguration or priority. Should less money go to treatment and more to prevention through public health? Should services be more centralised and less local in the hope they become more efficient – and better – by concentrating specialist expertise? Should London have less and the regions more? Should places with higher health needs have more and others less to reduce health inequality? Has old age become over-medicalised and is too much done to extend life at the expense of quality of life? And so on. We're not taking a view; just pointing out how often 'more' can be contested. This goes all the way up to the overall level of health funding compared with all the other ways money could be spent. There are, of course, vigorous defenders of a better funded NHS on the existing model, and to some people any talk of doing less means 'money before lives.' But does that really capture the full extent of the trade-offs?

It should also be clear that fiscal choices affect both spending and taxation. It's hard to touch one without impinging on the other. Impartiality means recognising this. Among outside interviewees, both left and right made the point. The left said tax cuts are talked about as if they're detached from their spending implications, and so a context-free 'tax is bad' presumption gets a free pass; the right that spending is described as if it's detached from tax and a 'spending good' presumption can go unchallenged.

Some objected to language like ‘tax burden’ or, from the other side, that when it’s said on the BBC that public money could be ‘set aside’ for some purpose – as it was – it’s as if there’s a pile of free cash itching to be allocated. We don’t think the language is the worst problem here, but for some interviewees it rankled. More important in our view is if it hides an assumption that weights the coverage, and to counteract that by keeping in mind the trade-offs on all sides. If money is to be ‘set aside’ for some purpose, set aside from what and whom? And might they have something to say about it?

In the end, those we spoke to external to the BBC, politically opposed as they were to one another, concurred: the trade-offs need to be clearer. We agree. They’re not altogether ignored: ‘how are you going to pay for that?’ is often asked, for example. But the point stands: these trade-offs are implicit in every spending and taxing decision, always, and need bringing out.

One journalist said the audience knows all this. We don’t think that’s enough, and it allows an air of unreality about what’s possible: if the answer to more spending is yes, and the answer to lower taxes is yes, good luck. In particular, it could be harder for interviewees to talk about a tax cut or ‘doing more for...’ in general or specific cases without proper challenge about the trade-offs. That could also be a quick way for journalists to check their own presumptions.

Another source of ‘spending good’ comes from the power of vivid personal narratives. Case studies – often used to make the case for ‘more’ – are helpful and valid. But the trade-off to them – if we hear about it – is likely to be a vague abstraction or a defensive line from a government minister, and the narrative has all the advantages. Programme makers could give some thought to how to bring the trade-offs to life.

‘If you put a politician – who has to think about that broad range of interests – up against somebody whose job is just to advocate for [someone getting more], you’re always going to come off worse because you can’t match their rhetoric. You can’t match what they’re asking for... Everything that politicians say and do is a choice that they’ve made between a range of competing priorities. We’re not bad people, by the way, because we’ve made this choice rather than that choice. It’s just that we think overall this is a better range of choices across the whole policy platform than that range of choices. But I think it puts us at a disadvantage if you want to zero in on what would you do about this specific thing compared to these people who are advocating just for this specific thing, who say you should spend billions on this and you’re like, ‘Well, we would spend fewer billions on that because we need to keep some of our billions for spending on the other things!’ (External)

5. Uncertainty.

Sometimes, there's a fair degree of expert economic consensus. But often there's uncertainty. The data are uncertain, the arguments uncertain, even what happened in the past and why is arguable, let alone what happens next. A recent BBC Online piece 'Five Things We Now Know about the UK Economy' had us reacting: '*No, we don't!*' This doesn't mean we know nothing, far from it. Uncertain is not the same as ignorant, and economics can be a powerful way of understanding the world. In any case, no matter how uncertain, we must still make decisions. But it does mean there are no absolute authorities, that we can't always be sure what's going on or why, that rules are usually contestable, that policy is almost always arguable if only in degree – though naturally some arguments are stronger than others.

The parody of the job of a journalist, on the other hand, is to stand in front of a solid, stone building, shoulders back with the glint of authority, and impart: 'This, Huw, is how it is...' A parody, but the tension's real.

'Economics at its best is all about doubt, to some extent. It's about uncertainty and it's about marshalling various different models of understanding the world and trying to conduct policy in a world of deep uncertainty. And there's no definitive interpretation of what happened in the 1930s, so there's just no way we're going to have a definitive, impartial interpretation of what's going on at the current moment. And so I think... we should try and portray some of that doubt and be quite open about it. But the problem is that that doesn't gel very well with kind of media formats... that all just gets compressed away when you have to just be cogent and do a quick live a lot of the time. And it doesn't work very well in politics for its own reasons.' (*External*).

The risk of skating over uncertainty is that it can make one economic answer appear more certain, or obvious, or necessary than it really is. That is a risk to impartiality.

Uncertainty is another argument for exploring alternative points of view. So if any BBC journalists are inclined to see it as a weakness to be avoided, we'd advise squashing that feeling as soon as possible. In any case, if the facts are uncertain, they should be reported as such. There is good evidence to suggest that this is received by audiences as a mark of trustworthiness.

There are two opposing temptations. One, throw up your hands and say it's all guesswork and economics is impenetrable. Two, go the other way and pretend it's black and white, right or wrong, or a world of 'must' – and complain that uncertainty kills a good story. Another way could be to think of it more like a detective story – and detective stories can be pretty compelling. Uncertainty can add drama to discovery.

Just occasionally, instead of ‘so you admit you don’t know...?’, as if every uncertainty were a sin, interviewers could ask a guest if they’re claiming to know too much. They could also ask more about the quality of the evidence. Evidence can be clear or inconclusive; it can also be reliable or not, in any combination. Probing that can be a way of testing decisions more impartially by bringing out the uncertainties.

‘I do think there is an enormous audience appetite for honesty and in-depth discussion of this kind of thing. And when we’ve done longer pieces – whether it’s on the data or whatever – I did a lot of long, long pieces... that ended up getting lots of hits and lots of engagement. And part of the point of those pieces a lot of the time was about the level of doubt, you know... And people like to hear about uncertainty, provided it’s coming from someone they trust. And I feel the BBC can do that if given the scope to do it.’ (*External*).

(As the ink dried on this review, we noticed more acknowledgment of economic uncertainties. For example: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/63588631>)

6. Choices.

A BBC journalist said in a live broadcast recently that the government 'is going to have to' cut spending and increase taxes. Various political interests could take offence at either part of that – and some did. Anything that implies a 'have to' cut spending could be contested by: 'but why not raise taxes instead?' Similarly, 'have to' raise taxes could be contested by those who say: 'why not cut spending instead?' Another person might say, according to preference, 'could we not avoid more taxes/more cuts by borrowing, at least for now?' Since in this case the provocation cuts various ways, this seems most likely to be evidence of a lapse in sensitivity or a mistake under pressure, not intentional bias.

'The objective of impartiality and the way we do it is to help people make up their mind and not to tell them what their mind should be. So, you know, impartiality is uniquely a BBC thing. It is curiosity and open-mindedness.' (*Internal*).

There is a general lesson, though. On fiscal policy, as with other policies, BBC journalists should beware saying or implying that a government 'must...' raise taxes, cut debt, cut spending, raise spending, etc. – in any area. These are choices. To imply a 'must' might sound to the journalist like a statement of economic necessity, but it's often to side with one political choice over others. This is not impartial. Governments often claim their choices are acts of necessity; this does not make them so.

The phrase 'fiscal rule' might likewise convey necessity. But fiscal rules are only rules because the government of the day chooses to call them that. They may be reasonable attempts at self-discipline or signals of intent, but they're not rules because some natural law dictates it. A fiscal rule saying debt should normally reduce as a share of GDP over time might be reasonable, but there can also be reasonable debate about whether now is normal, and some argue against it altogether.

'One of the difficulties in these economic areas is that economists do over-claim to have objective knowledge when actually there are value judgments involved that are submerged in what they say... I agree that generally they [fiscal rules] are completely arbitrary. I think they're political tools not economic management tools.' (*External*).

The problem here is discussing an objective as if it's a given, without asking if it's the right objective.

'... the presenter, in a question to the Chancellor, said something along the lines of, "Everyone agrees that you need to make savings," and it's like, well, no, they don't.' (*Internal*)

Journalists should reflect before saying what governments ‘can’ or ‘can’t’ do lest they imply endorsement of an objective, an underlying policy framework, or beliefs which are contestable. After all, the ‘rules’ frequently change. In short, you are allowed to question the premise.

‘The media in general, want to know the answer to two questions, one of which is kind of crudely, ‘Does it add up?’, and the other is, ‘Who wins and who loses?’ And it’s rather disappointing they’re not at least as interested in the third question which is kind of, you know, ‘Is it a good policy?’” (*External*).

‘So often we don’t question - and not just in this area, in so many areas - we don’t question the premise of... what’s being put before us as to whether it’s even valid or sometimes take a step back and think, ‘Ten years ago, this wasn’t an issue. Why are we accepting this now?’ It’s whatever the framing is at the moment.’ (*Internal*)

‘Headroom’ likewise does not define the height of nature’s universal ceiling, nor ‘wiggle room’ its walls, they’re chosen measures of what the government of the day has decided it can do in the circumstances, given its policy choices and objectives. There may be arguments why one choice seems more compelling, but that’s not enough for the BBC to endorse it. What the financial markets do is a real constraint, but why they do it isn’t always clear or predictable, or a law of nature. Even a question like: ‘Do the numbers add up?’ can make economics sound like nothing more than arithmetic – when what they add up to may be a debatable choice.

All told, accepting the language of necessity about taxation, public spending, government borrowing or debt is a risk to impartiality. In any case, there’s a simple, richer, alternative to ‘must’ that emphasises choice and debate. We noted some excellent examples of this recently.

Two of the BBC’s most senior journalists volunteered separately how surprised they were early in their careers to discover that economists disagreed, and economics was not black and white. How many labour under the misapprehension that economic judgment is little more than arithmetic with right and wrong answers? Might that account for some of the naivety about what’s contestable, what’s a choice and what’s necessity?

7. Range of contributors.

Who else could be interviewed or consulted if we say political balance alone is not enough?

A recent concern has been that fringe views with little support are sometimes given equal weight to an overwhelming consensus on the other side. We agree this can be a problem. But there's also risk the other way, of accepting too narrow a consensus and excluding reasonable opinion. We don't want to miss fringe views that turn out right or interests with real weight, nor do we want implausible fantasists.

BBC staff think hard about their choice of interviewees. In most cases they're good at finding people to speak for diverse interests in health, education and all the other areas of public spending. But in economics we think there's a case for a small shift in the balance of perceived risks towards more breadth of expert view (this implies no opinion about subjects outside economics).

We mentioned a well-known academic who felt his views on debt were largely ignored during austerity, and who many might now say had a reasonable argument. Some think concerns about rising inflation were also overlooked until too late. Similarly, few people saw the 2008 Global Financial Crisis coming, and those who did weren't much heeded. The latter examples are outside our remit, but all highlight how easy it is in economics to misjudge the reasonable range of views.

'Due' impartiality partly means the BBC is not obliged to interview every outlier with an opinion for the sake of spurious balance (our definition, not the BBC's). But economics has previous when it comes to being overly dismissive and confident: *'A point which may seem a bit out there on the day... proves to be completely correct within three months or six months,'* one internal interviewee said.

'There are big issues that we bring to the table for which we're disparaged, actually, for a long time. And then suddenly everybody picks up on them and we're still not heard! So, once Ed Miliband picks up this idea, it's no longer an idiotic idea, it's suddenly mainstream.' *(External)*.

Is coverage of fiscal policy too often in a comfort zone? Does it use mainstream politics or other partial perspectives to set parameters of reasonableness which are too narrow? Does the BBC depend for comment too much on the usual suspects? Given the range of fiscal policy choices within Europe and the US alone, there's clearly a wide range of potential views, many of which don't appear in UK debate. Should the BBC be more inclusive, more open to dissenting views?

‘Not just the BBC but British journalism is extremely bad at international comparisons. And I think that situating this in the context of the rest of Europe also America but understanding that we are a mid-Atlantic sort of fiscal economy and that lots of other very successful countries make different choices would be really helpful.’ *(External)*

Where there’s a consensus, it should be taken seriously; but a mainstream political consensus should not be mistaken for an economic one, and no apparent consensus should go without challenge. The consensus can be wrong; it might not be as consensual as it seems; it can change. So due impartiality should not mean taking refuge in consensus or the mainstream, or that serious critics are lightly dismissed or ignored.

‘Overall I really do think the BBC is great and, like all stations, it could do better in terms of having a broader range of views. But I wouldn’t say it’s a very easy job.’ *(External)*.

This is doubly true in economics where the value of humility often comes up, given its inherent uncertainties (‘The experience of being disastrously wrong is salutary; no economist should be spared it, and few are.’ Mervyn King, former Bank of England governor). Nor should the BBC feel it can subcontract judgement about what’s reasonable or impartial to a few established names like the Bank of England, the OBR, the IFS or the Resolution Foundation, however respected.

Fallibility is another part of the case for more restlessness, and maybe for a more organised search for new contributors who can offer intelligent challenge to what’s taken for the consensus or mainstream. Editorial meetings that consist of asking who we can already think of are not really stretching, and one or two people at the BBC told us their contacts books felt a little stale. Part of the problem, of course, is time to look. But as an example, the business team in Salford (part of Money and Work) seems to us to have widened the range of business voices, and we wonder if being in Salford is part of it.

‘I see a lot of “Whoah, should we be doing that?” And...pulling punches on putting certain voices on or putting people on... maybe sometimes leads to [us] not... getting the range of voices that we should sometimes have.’ *(Internal)*.

All of which is to say we think the BBC could widen its horizons a little, improve diversity along the way, and that economics and other specialist teams could help.

8. Range of ideas.

Sometimes, more breadth means little more than a programme team asking an awkward question. *Newsnight*, to take one example, prides itself on this, and accepts it will bring controversy. While we don't think controversy for its own sake should be a BBC value, we do think there's sometimes a whiff of anxiety around certain subjects, economics among them. Might a streak of awkwardness in the name of broad impartiality help stiffen resistance to the many strong pressures towards conformity? Speaking of which...

'The newspapers are a big part of that. So, doing the early shifts, you're picking up what's in the papers because that's the news that's been generated overnight that is the basis of the national conversation the next morning... The organisation is far too swayed by what's in the newspapers. And that's increasingly so when the newspaper readership is absolutely dwindling. It's not that these newspapers are tapping into like huge swathes of the country and so, therefore, we can rely on them to be helping us reflect the country back to itself. But then I also think a reason that we come to rely on the papers a bit too much is because they are decisive about what is happening. And it's very hard to be decisive... when you're in a chaotic environment where you don't have all the facts in your possession. And it's like that whole thing about if somebody takes charge, you end up being sort of quite grateful to them!... I just wonder sometimes do we let the papers take charge of what's going on?' (*Internal*).

Our unexciting view of other media is that they should be neither oppressor nor compass, but maybe, if you're lucky, one more useful voice among many offering a different view or a challenge.

On range generally, we note a comment by Faisal Islam, BBC economics editor, a few days after the September 2022 mini budget had been reversed. Most of our research was done before these events, so we can't dwell on them, but this highlights the issue: 'Ultimately,' Faisal wrote, 'it was not the actual policy in the mini budget that was the problem, it was the perception that Downing Street wanted to rip up the controls on the economy that had brought relative stability for a quarter of a century.'

We respect Faisal's judgment. We think he makes a careful point that can't be dismissed lightly – and say so regardless of whether we agree with him: '...it was not the actual policy... it was the perception.' Why do we find this so interesting? Because we think it will have surprised many BBC colleagues.

If so, why? Were they not exposed enough to that argument? Did they treat with impartiality interviewees who argued either side of that case? Or did they slip into a consensus that the problem was the policy itself which was simply naive? We haven't looked closely at this output, as we say, and we're aware some journalists tried hard to test the arguments, but we trust them to reflect further and bear in mind more generally that a consensus can be a bandwagon in all but name.

Sometimes the simplest questions, against the direction of media coverage, can be surprisingly revealing: 'and is that really a big number?', for example. That such a small poke at the consensus can seem even mildly defiant suggests the media are easily herded. What we're asking the BBC to consider is whether a defiantly independent attitude can be an important aspect of broad impartiality. If so, is it sufficiently encouraged? Clearly, that's easier in Current Affairs or Online than on the *Six* – there's more space. It must also be weighed against the risk of sounding wilfully perverse – as we'll discuss. And if all it produces is turgid explainers of little-known facts watched by no one, that's no good either. But it shouldn't be impossible to find more occasions for honest but awkward *and* engaging inquiry, which does exist in BBC output, but not sufficiently, as we think the evidence in this review suggests. It's a creative challenge we leave with the BBC.

One last practical concern we heard: whatever its advantages, it's harder to get away from the mainstream when commissioning is centralised. It reduces variety.

But we also heard a dissenting view – that staff sometimes protest too much and if they have a good idea that challenges a received view they'll usually be encouraged.

9. Journalistic risk

We said specialist journalists feel ready to try to widen the BBC's horizons in the name of broad impartiality, but they see obstacles, and others have objections.

One of these we interpret as a tension between broad impartiality and due impartiality. Due impartiality can be seen as limiting the obligation to depart from the mainstream; broad impartiality as potentially strengthening that obligation.

This might not be the BBC's intention. On due impartiality, the Editorial Guidelines already say: 'Breadth and diversity of opinion may require not just a political and cultural range, but, on occasions, reflection of the variations between urban and rural, older and younger, poorer and wealthier, the innovative and the status quo, etc. It may involve exploration of perspectives in different communities, interest groups and geographic areas.' (BBC Editorial Guidelines 2019, section 4.3.1).

But we think in practice this requirement gets squeezed, and a narrower view often prevails. Some journalists told us that to step outside the political frame risks the criticism that they're making the news, not reporting it, or even 'lobbying' for interests that have no peg, as journalists put it.

'Do you have to take a position about what is bad in the world to generate a scoop? Because by implication... as an organisation have we decided, 'It is a disgrace that x is happening and this data that we discovered proved it.' And, actually, you do feel that when you're doing a piece of original journalism: am I becoming a campaigner for something? So I think it's about finding creative ways of identifying information and presenting it, but in a way that doesn't seem like you're a lobby group.' (Internal)

Some distinguished between News and other output, arguing forcefully that it was wrong for News to report anything but current news. '*Focus on the issues that are in play... [not] telling people what issues should be in play,*' said another. Though possibly other, non-News programmes might have more leeway, some said. While there are already places where awkward lines of inquiry away from the mainstream are part of a programme's identity (the *Newsnight* team felt this helped define them, as we say), one editor felt that 'a few ghettos' weren't enough, and maybe News could also stretch its remit.

'I think the narrowness is probably borne out ... by lack of expertise or understanding in the subject area which leads obviously to a bit of lack of confidence or sure-footedness... And so, you know, you lean on... the consensus of the debate and probably a binary approach to the debate because you're in the safety zone, right? So, as you know... you don't want to be sort of on the end of some horrendous misjudgement or error.' (Internal).

Clearly, you can go too far in both directions. Trawling for obscure views in the name of tick-box broad impartiality would be a recipe for bad output and contrary to the ideal it's meant to serve. But playing it safe, without curiosity for what the pack could be missing and saying that's just how it is so if you're ignored, tough, doesn't impress either. And we think the BBC *is* missing or neglecting things.

We understand the anxiety about 'making the news'. But we wonder if it comes close to a claim that the news is only news if a certain kind of somebody else says it; so if it's happening, but they're not talking about it, it's somehow not news. Facts about/changes to/interests of the population, however substantial, become secondary, the kind of thing you slip into an interview as background given a chance.

'In terms of should we be making the news, I'd phrase it differently. Are we wrong to raise issues on behalf of the audience?... So, I think raising issues that are of concern to your audience, that you have the ability to then raise with politicians or opinion formers or decision makers on their behalf, is absolutely the right thing to be in.' (*Internal*).

As you can tell, we struggle to see how a narrow view of news is consistent with taking broad impartiality seriously. If the BBC thinks it should deliver narrow news, it could be clearer – and also say how that meets broad impartiality. If not, it might want to think about how to push the boundaries. Broad impartiality expresses a renewed ambition, so it's no surprise there are details to work out. We hope this review helps clarify a few questions.

In practice, the boundaries of news aren't fixed, so stretching them isn't a heresy. And we don't want to give the impression that news teams are 'churnalist' automata, never questioning, never exploring. We know they can be thoughtful, restless and challenging, and sometimes so can the output. We just wonder how they could be helped to do more of what they'd often like to do anyway. News does include original investigations, and other broadcasters see no difficulty in handing over parts of a bulletin to an economic perspective they say is under-appreciated, with only the authority of the editor who presents it. News is not just out there fully defined; it's also a set of choices.

But the biggest doubt we heard was if staff were going to seek out neglected interests they'd want to be sure editors and others 'had their back', as they put it, as it could invite criticism. They were far from confident they could rely on this.

Instead, some felt there was safety in apparent consensus and the mainstream, even as they acknowledged the issues with consensus already noted. But it can at least be defended as due impartiality – because what is that other than what's already thought reasonable or important? The BBC might want to clarify what it

wants from its journalists, as this raises basic questions about what kind of news organisation the BBC wants to be.

‘There will obviously be a consensus, even if it’s subconscious, within the BBC. There will be influential, powerful people saying things and tilting and directing in meetings and everything else. ‘I think this is what we should be... zeroing in on, this is what we should be looking at, right?’ So that’s all, again, framing the nature of the debate and the discussion. And then there’s also what I would call within journalism itself sort of the unhealthy consensus which is there’s a slight pack mentality... And, again, that’s perhaps a safety thing ... you sort of feel a bit better because everyone else is driving the same thing. And it’s quite difficult, or you’ve got to be pretty confident or pretty on top of your subject to say, ‘Hey, let’s just step back from this.’ Now, there are obviously people who can do that: Evan Davis can do that and Faisal can do that. But, you know, further down the sort of production ranks, it’s probably different. And so that probably needs a little bit of thinking about.’ *(Internal)*.

‘That word consensus should send a shiver down the spine whenever we hear it really, or at least a question mark. You know, whenever we hear that word, we should grab hold of the biggest question mark we can find and plonk it immediately after it. So, to think, well, hang on a moment, is there? Is there really? You know, and who isn’t saying that? And often it’s people who are hard to find.’ *(Internal)*

Note on transparency.

We’re aware of a BBC initiative to encourage reports to be more transparent about how newsgathering operates. Not a bad idea, we think, as it might help with impartiality. There are sometimes good reasons editors put content on air which some people find biased; the reasons could briefly be given. ‘Why did they do that...?’ ‘Because...’

Diversified content can be justified, as we justified it, by being frank that economics can be uncertain. You can let in a few more outlying economic views if they’re signposted, though there’d be little point if it’s only to scorn them (the treatment one outlier interviewee complained of).

10. Nations.

Again, one of the first things we found was warm appreciation for the quality of coverage by BBC teams in the Nations, for the specialists in particular. We feel they know the issues about their nations far better than we do, as you'd expect, and we found them reflective about impartiality.

In general, we think much of this review applies equally in their areas. For example, we heard complaints that some political framings can be limiting or distorting.

'We have almost reached the point where public spending stories in Scotland are reflected as though they're sport, and that you have not insight as to issues, what you have is accusation-based journalism – that we have a position where a claim is made by the political opposition and it's the claim that's reported and the rebuttal to claim that's reported as opposed to the issue that is reported.' (*External*).

Overall, though, we have little to add that's specific, but there are one or two points worth noting. We made a couple earlier about Wales and Northern Ireland: that Wales pays more VAT than income tax, along with others, but has anyone else noticed? And that the debate in Northern Ireland is shaped by the limited tax powers of its assembly so that almost all fiscal argument is on the spending side.

There are other significant fiscal differences between the nations, and we were told these are often not well understood or explained by the shared news bulletins, and that a diverse picture in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can be bundled into a footnote. Or that journalists challenge the wrong level of government (UK, national, or local). As one interviewee put it, the question is always '*What are you going to do about it?*' When the answer might be: '*Well, have you considered asking the people actually responsible?*' We were also told that responsibility can be overly personified.

We hear these frustrations, which are not confined to fiscal policy, though doubt we can add much to the BBC's understanding that the network news would ideally be telling four stories not one in a typical two-and-a-half minute item... except to add a warning: that this problem could be writ large by broad impartiality, and not just for the nations, but for all geographic and other interests.

'If you take at the very basic level impartiality being, 'Do we cover stories that people are interested in and want to hear about?', if you look at... BBC National Network News... it's hard to make a case that we cover health and education to as great an extent as we cover it for England. And why would we... there are 50 million people in England and 5 million people in Scotland? But if you're a BBC licence fee payer in Scotland, what do you care about that? Why, when you turn on the national news, is it so dominated by English news and the English debate about health and education and so on, and indeed therefore arguably framed by – and this is a point of contention, if you accept that the centre line just to initially start at least with a traditional Left/Right divide is slightly farther to the Right in England than it is in Scotland – and, at the very least, electoral results over the last half-century would suggest it is – then aren't you immediately starting from a position that licence fee payers in Scotland might regard as not purely straight-down-the-middle impartial?' (Internal).

The 'centre line' or political starting position came up often. Almost everyone we spoke to said Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland favour higher public spending than England, and one external interviewee said Scotland had a different conception of fairness. Some qualified this by saying that actions aren't always equal to rhetoric and in practice the policy differences are often small, but even they felt there was something in the idea of different starting points.

We doubt any of this will be news to the BBC. Unsurprisingly, we've no solution either, and only add, if it's not stating the obvious, that we think impartiality here will come under most strain with this question: should BBC Scotland, for example, be aligned with the Scottish centre line, and therefore somewhat in opposition to England?

'One of the things that we need to be wary of is that we don't end up in a Westminster bad, Scotland good scenario. So that's something we tend to be alive to...' (Internal)

So again, we find correspondents alert to the risk. The same applies especially to the Gaelic and Welsh language services, which are appreciated partly – according to audiences researched for this review – because they affirm their audiences' identity. How far should these services go in identifying with their audience?

Another anxiety we heard, once again, was that some voices aren't heard enough.

'We're giving far less coverage than we used to, to corporate news, company news particularly. We used to do a lot of that online and that's been pulled back massively... A weekly half-hour radio programme called *Business Scotland*... was axed because of a budget squeeze... The closest approximation to it is now a consumer-oriented programme about how to manage your household budget, your personal finances, how to be a better consumer - which is all justifiable. But, in pursuing the under-served audiences and trying to get them to a more popular appeal, we've left quite a lot behind. And I think some of what we left behind was quite important, partly in terms of giving a platform to people who are newsmakers in business.'
(Internal).

Finally, we heard a lot of sensitivity to the language around grants and subsidies, but we're not able to say if the BBC is usually the source of this language or if it tends to originate in politics.

'Every single region and nation in the UK now has a deficit because of borrowing for coronavirus, including London. And so, in effect, there's a transfer to every single nation and region of the UK now and, up to the pre-pandemic era, there was only three regions of England that were in net surplus - the south-east, the East of England and London. So it's a loaded term to say that there's a transfer or subsidy to Wales when most of England was also in receipt of a transfer or subsidy, although not as directly as through the Barnett formula.'
(External).

Arguments about 'subsidy' have bite because they reflect the larger debate about the fiscal prospects for an independent Scotland. We're not about to try to settle that, just to observe how much hangs on a word here or there, or on tone. For example, one editor said he'd heard a Radio 4 interviewer refer to 'little Scotland'.

'A lot of people in Scotland, who were in favour of independence, would see that as immediate evidence: 'That's exactly what I thought the BBC was like. I knew it.'
(Internal)

What struck us in the end was that judgments about impartiality are best made by those who know the culture *and* the economics. Notwithstanding the general points in earlier sections, we found the specialists better placed to do this than we are but note that independent and informed voices are rare. We trust the BBC will continue to recognise their value.

'There's not a huge amount of journalistic commentators who could write a blog like Douglas Fraser anymore... And so there's definitely a lack of capacity, we think, to really understand the issues. And it's going to make it more difficult for them to be able to really probe politicians and hold them to account.'
(External).

And just to finish with one more observation of the journalistic opportunities.

‘We’re not very good at taking a step back and [saying]: ‘hang on, that’s six regions have done the story about buses, why are we not doing a big thing, pulling all that together about buses and then joining forces to do that?’ And I think it’s the same with those prison stories where you get the very nose up to the windshield, local version of it. And we’re not stepping in enough to sort of say, actually, we can spot something bubbling up here that’s got a sort of national resonance if we put some resource behind that. So I think that’s the creative opportunity: is to pick a couple of subjects like that and work with Nations and Regions on a bit more sort of, you know, joint enterprise.’ *(Internal)*.

11. Audiences.

Audience research for this review by Jigsaw produced one striking finding: how many people said they struggle to understand fiscal policy and therefore the BBC's coverage of it – though we think it likely they wouldn't understand anyone else's either. *'Over my head'*, was a typical comment. As this was a qualitative piece of work, we can't quantify the extent of the problem, but the sample was recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population, and while many people clearly *do* follow and appreciate the output, it's evidently a big problem. Jigsaw found comprehension challenges across the demographic groups. More confident participants typically had a background – education or career, maybe – that explained their deeper understanding, and these were in the minority in Jigsaw's research. This should unnerve anyone in the media who talks economics (it unnerved us).

'Reports that featured economics specialists and third-party experts describing or explaining intrinsically complex areas could be a real struggle for the majority of participants.' *Jigsaw audience research.*

It meant these audiences struggled to assess the impartiality of coverage because they couldn't fully make sense of the subject matter. Numbers were too big, implications hard to grasp, arguments hard to understand, terminology mystifying... No surprise this kind of news tended not to trigger partisan or identity sensitivities. Jigsaw found a relationship between low understanding, low engagement and lack of views about impartiality, all reinforcing each other.

Instead, these audiences looked for what Jigsaw called surface criteria, like tone of voice, or 'does the range of views I'm hearing seem one-sided?' Judgements about impartiality followed (again, our words): 'the reporting wasn't critical enough...' or 'the reporting was too critical'. Or they might ask: 'does the report include a variety of people? No? Then I have my doubts about it.' If it's about something they've experienced personally: 'does the reporting match my experience?' No? Again, a reason for mistrust.

We noted that Jigsaw described VAT as 'less salient and more invisible to participants' but also 'some were conscious of the impact on prices and costs' when prompted. That tallies with our own research – VAT affects them, they feel it, but they don't see it in the media. Income tax was judged more salient, again as we'd now expect. The NHS was the big exception, judged the most engaging subject with most personal relevance.

But though they often felt lost, they did think explainers helped...

‘Although reactions occasionally indicated that audiences were sometimes sensitive to being patronised, in general these explanatory and educational pieces were appreciated. Audiences found them both interesting and enlightening’
Jigsaw audience research.

‘The research indicates that there is some appetite for more explanatory and educational output that will help raise the audience’s baseline understanding of relevant content. This will potentially help with comprehension challenges, but not solve them.’ *Jigsaw audience research.*

A question for this review is whether impartiality between the interests of different groups should include how accessible they find the coverage. We say it should. If the BBC agrees, that brings quite a creative challenge: how to mix much more engaging, explanatory background into its coverage of both economics and the political debate around economics. At the moment, a large part of the audience appears to feel that coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt is usually remote from their lives, often unintelligible.

‘The challenge of impartiality, as it comes to your specific area, is: can you make this stuff comprehensible, which normally involves simplifying and reducing it. Can you do that in a way that is fair to all sides of an argument?’ (*Internal*).

Jigsaw reported that there are underlying emotions about the subject matter, often latent, such as worries about waste, or feelings of unfairness about where the money goes and ‘how much we have spent’. And the audience does have underlying questions – are we paying too much tax, is it wasted, how will we pay for what we need? We suspect the BBC already knows these are the kind of things audiences ask.

But we wonder if lower income audiences would have identified VAT as an interest, given the media isn’t telling them how it affects them. It’s a chicken and egg problem that means you can’t depend on simply asking audiences what they want to know.

‘There was an attempt to do this kind of participatory budgeting in Wales where the Finance Committee would go out and ask stakeholders in the population... what they want to see more spending on, but it became a useless project because everybody would say health. You know, so health just kind of runs away to the extent that everything else in the budget can be sacrificed for health spending, but obviously that can’t be true because you’ve got to have education, transport spending, the rest. But health spending is the one that dominates people’s interest in spending, as well as the coverage.’ (*External*).

There was one general exception to these findings. In Scotland, audiences were more sensitive to the subject matter, more likely to map it to the Scottish political landscape, more likely to raise impartiality concerns. For some, this was related to their views about independence and the economic and fiscal implications (see section 10, above).

There's plenty more in Jigsaw's report about how audiences respond to the subject matter and its coverage in news and other genres. We've put the full report in the appendix.

12. Social media.

'Programme teams try hard to ensure that the content is fair and impartial in a fast paced, competitive environment,' said our researchers about BBC social media output. That sounds right, though sampling for key words is an imperfect art. But it was good enough to flag a couple of concerns.

First, an old convention is that in a headline just one word in inverted commas means 'we're not saying this, it's someone else.' But in a tweet from the BBC, does that '...' register with younger audiences and people in a hurry? Or do they see the words as the BBC's?



BBC Politics 
@BBCPolitics

...

UK government debt interest payments hit record high
- £8.2bn - in February



BBC NEWS

bbc.co.uk

Spring Statement: Borrowing figures give Rishi Sunak 'wobble room'

One influential economist says government borrowing this year could be about £25bn less than expected.

We'd like to think people will clock the inverted commas around 'wobble room' and know which are the BBC's words and which the opinion of the influential economist. We also think there's a chance some won't. (Also note the cash 'record' – our inverted commas). The team found other examples.

Similarly, it's common to say retweets don't imply endorsement, but is that like the small print – largely unnoticed? We don't know. Around Budget Day and the Autumn Statement, BBC programmes often retweet think-tank judgements. This clearly isn't bias but, without more clarity, could it lead to that perception? We think the risk sufficient for the BBC to consider a change to its guidelines.

Conclusion

First, something we said that stands repeating: **there's much to admire in BBC output on tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt.**

'Stepping back, trying to park whether you're coming from one of those two perspectives [left or right] or not we should be thinking: 'Thank God we've got the BBC,' and, overall – not that anyone gets everything right all the time, ever ... but that people are trying to do the right thing and doing that in very complicated circumstances, particularly when we come to some of the faster changing bits of the economic picture.' (*External*).

Second, something else we said: **you never know what might turn up until you look.** That underlies everything here. There are points of view out there, direct interests too, things people might want to know, that are easily missed, and that politics doesn't always reach. Broad impartiality is nothing if not a commitment to the audience to go out and find them, whatever anyone else is saying.

This is demanding. We looked in only a few corners; there'd probably be more to find in other areas of public spending, local government, pensions and benefits, and so on, but it would take determination. The first step is to accept that broad impartiality brings a stronger obligation to look.

After that, it's mostly **a question of organisation:** how to use what you've got for the best chance of doing it well, but not so much that it looks perverse. Attitude can sometimes help as can knowing where the dragons are and making the most of the expertise already there. Resources also matter, but we're not naïve; we understand both how stretched staff feel, how most have no choice but to be generalists, how fast they work, how they'd like more expertise at hand and time to be less reactive, and we know the constraints can't be wished away.

There are probably a few simple things, though. For example...

'I think what for me comes out of this – which I wouldn't have said at the beginning because I wouldn't have thought of it – is making sure that there's a decent proportion that isn't just presenters arguing with politicians, and making sure that a big part of impartiality is giving the context around the thing that you're reporting. And that might be, 'This case is not entirely typical,' and it might be, 'This thing we're reporting on, by the way, actually has a much more niche importance than you would probably think.' (*Internal*)

'Sometimes all it literally needs is... one extra sentence in there that helps just add an alternative point of view but doesn't like hijack the whole article into becoming this really dense, boring thesis.' (*External*).

'It is just finding a way internally, I think, for the BBC to carry on reminding itself of the range of different debates. And we don't take time out of our day because our days are always filled with just what's on the news agenda today.' (*Internal*).

But there are also probably a few fundamentals, like where in the output you try to fulfil the broad impartiality remit, who reports what, what gets to be called 'news', whether you're in earnest about the whole idea of broad impartiality and thus how far you want to go with 'making the news', and how you deal with journalists' struggles with economics.

Another fundamental is the creative challenge. If we think the BBC is missing public interests and richness of debate in this area – which we do – a big obstacle to doing more is that a large part of the audience doesn't get it and doesn't relate to it. The BBC excels at finding new, engaging ways of covering old subjects once thought dull, niche, or inaccessible, so it shouldn't be beyond the bounds in this case. But it's also not as if reporters and programme makers aren't constantly asking themselves how to do it, so there's evidently no easy answer. But if ever there was a need...

But we also know that much of this takes time and money, and there are other things the BBC could be doing, and other pressures. We acknowledge the trade-offs – but they're for the BBC to judge.