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Tunnel Vision: the tendency for BBC economic and business news to follow elite opinion and exclude other credible perspectives

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Introduction

This paper focuses on a very specific element of television's role in promoting a more creative and robust public culture, namely the economic and business journalism produced by the BBC. Despite increased competition from online news organisations, BBC News holds three of the top five positions in the overall rankings¹. The BBC is also rated as a highly trustworthy source of economic and business news² and since the Financial Crisis, there has been a substantial increase in audience interest³. Economic and business news equips the public with essential knowledge and understanding to make informed decisions – as consumers, workers, tax payers and citizens – and is a vital element of the BBC's journalistic output. Unfortunately, only around a fifth of viewers believe that the Corporation gives a 'fair and balanced picture' of the economic environment⁴. For these reasons, it is important to take a critical look at the impartiality of the BBC's journalism in this sphere.

The left-wing problem

The central role that public service broadcasting plays in British democracy was clearly demonstrated during the 2015 General Election campaign. Among the countless interviews, numerous speeches and the endless analysis, one quote from BBC TV's coverage stands out because it exemplifies a formidable challenge facing the Corporation. It came from UKIP leader Nigel Farage who, during a heated interaction on BBC 1's *Question Time*, said (emphasis added):

There just seems to be a total lack of comprehension on this panel and, indeed, amongst this audience, which is a remarkable audience even by the *left-wing standards of the BBC*⁵

Farage's contention that BBC habitually tilts left is not unique. Indeed, this belief is oft-repeated⁶ with columnists in the Conservative-supporting press particularly strident in their views. The *Daily Mail*'s Richard Littlejohn, for example, even saw evidence of this tendency in the BBC's

1 Ofcom (2014)

2 BBC Trust (2012)

3 Pre-Financial Crisis most people kept up with financial issues 'about once a month, and 40 percent never, or rarely. Post-Crisis, one third are doing so daily and more than three quarters are doing so at least weekly' (Reuters Institute in Coyle 2012)

4 BBC Trust 2012

5 Farage (2015)

6 For example, Johnson (2012), Budd (2007:14), BBC Journalism Group (2007:15)

2014 'austerity-laden' Christmas TV schedule⁷. Public opinion also sways in the same direction: according to an *Opinium/Observer* poll in 2013, 41 percent of respondents said the BBC displays some bias, and of these twice as many people thought it favours the left rather than the right.⁸ Overall, only 37 percent placed the BBC as neutral which, for an organisation that has a statutory duty to impartiality, should be a concern for regulators, the BBC Trust, journalists, programme makers, and the general public alike. The challenge is even greater in the context of economic and business news: the Corporation's own research⁹ has revealed that audiences do not fully understand the coverage; they would like it to 'relate more to their own circumstances'; and 'only 22 percent believe it gives a fair and balanced picture.'

The 'anti-business' fallacy

Impartiality is a legal requirement of the BBC Charter and a core editorial value¹⁰ and applies equally to all output. It is impossible to be perfectly impartial in every news item, of course, and so BBC journalists are obliged to show 'due impartiality,' which (emphasis added):

... requires us to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. *It does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view*¹¹

Achieving due impartiality clearly requires high-level editorial decisions that take into account the reporting of an issue over time. The BBC has a devolved editorial structure by which authority is given to programme and unit editors who follow the principles of the Corporation's code of conduct but take responsibility for their team's output¹². Hence, although the BBC has clear guidelines on impartiality at an institutional level, how these are implemented is largely the decision of editors.

The BBC did not have a business editor until 2001 when it appointed Jeff Randall to the role. In his five year tenure, Randall remodelled the Corporation's business coverage on the premise that the BBC he had joined: 'was culturally and structurally biased against business.'¹³ This tendency was so pronounced, said Randall in another interview, that: 'on the whole, they [the BBC] treated business as if it was a criminal activity.'¹⁴ Randall's perception that the Corporation was fiercely 'anti-business' added fuel to the perennial belief that the BBC was 'left wing.' In 2007, such views contributed to the commissioning of a major study by the BBC Trust into the impartiality of the Corporation's business reporting.

7 Littlejohn (2014)

8 Helm (2013)

9 BBC Trust (2012)

10 Neil (2004)

11 BBC (2010)

12 Neil (2004)

13 Randall in Kelly and Boyle (2011:232)

14 Randall in CBI (2007)

If the BBC's journalism were 'anti-business', as Randall *et al* maintain, one would expect BBC news to generally favour organisations and viewpoints traditionally associated with the left. However, the author of the 2007 study, Alan Budd, found no 'evidence of systemic (anti-business) bias'¹⁵ but he did discover a neglect of news from the perspectives of investors and workers. Indeed, the author noted indifference to the coverage of labour issues:

Around 29 million people work for a living in the UK and spend a large proportion of their waking hours in the workplace. However, little of this important part of UK life is reflected in the BBC's business coverage¹⁶

The belief that the BBC is 'anti-business' or indeed, 'left-wing' in general, is often informed by naked opinion and prejudice. However, as suggested by the Budd Report, the systematic and methodical analysis of news points to economic and business journalism of quite a different hue.

Whereas Budd noted an underrepresentation of organised labour, a study of BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme's coverage of the UK government's bank rescue plan in 2008 revealed the exclusion of other arguments from the left¹⁷. The author assessed the extent to which competing solutions to the banking crisis were given exposure and credence. If the BBC had been true to the accusations of left-wing tendencies, then nationalisation, a flagship of left-wing thought, would have dominated. However, the option that took centre stage in the programme's coverage, injecting public money or the 'bank bailout', was supported by virtually all key sources, mostly from the City of London. In contrast, nationalisation was barely mentioned or quickly dismissed.

Opinion beyond Westminster and the City

It is important to note that Budd's assessments were made against a definition of impartiality from a previous BBC publication, the Neil Report, which requires the Corporation's journalism:

(to be)...fair and open minded in reflecting all significant strands of opinion, and exploring the range and conflict of views¹⁸

What constitutes: 'significant strands of opinion' is clearly open to debate. The leading political parties' viewpoints are naturally included, but because no party currently offers a coherent and comprehensive alternative economic narrative¹⁹, one could argue that views from beyond the broad parliamentary consensus are insignificant by definition. However, in the light of capitalism's evident fragility - the Financial Crisis and the subsequent global recession - one might expect the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, to give greater exposure and credence to alternative discourses.

¹⁵ Budd (2007:14)

¹⁶ Budd (2007:19)

¹⁷ Berry (2012)

¹⁸ Neil in Budd (2007:6)

¹⁹ At the time of writing, it is not possible to say if the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn will offer a different set of economic policies to those of the governing Conservative Party

Alternative economic discourses undoubtedly exist, and high-profile critics include Nobel Prize winners Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman, and the international financier, George Soros²⁰. Numerous writers, journalists and academics have also questioned core neoliberal assumptions and asked whether markets serve the public interest well. Other authors have focussed on the brutality of an economic system that prioritises unfettered profit maximisation over social concerns.²¹ In addition, there are countless NGOs, trade unions, grassroots pressure groups, and other organisations that have their own specific issue with the modern market economy. Indeed, despite the major political parties' convergence in policy, there is evidence that the world's publics are not convinced. In 2009, a major international survey²² found widespread disillusionment with capitalism. In only two countries did more than 20 percent of people think it was working well, and a higher proportion thought it 'fatally flawed.' Globally, there was also significant support for more government regulation of business and a fairer distribution of wealth²³.

Despite this widespread – and often very credible - scepticism toward capitalism, academic research suggests that BBC journalists focus their attentions on opinions from Westminster and the City of London. The inevitable consequence of this tunnel vision is that viewpoints from outside a narrow corridor of power are largely excluded. In the case of the 'bank bailout', nationalisation was advocated by some leading economists but it had little support among the British financial and political elite. As a result, BBC journalists felt no obligation to include this option in debates²⁴. The same phenomenon was also evident in a comparative analysis of the reporting of economics and business by four British news providers²⁵. In total, the author analysed some 1,625 articles published by the BBC News website, the *Guardian/Observer*, the Telegraph Group, and the *Times/Sunday Times*. For each of three issues – economic globalisation, private finance in public services, and supermarket power – all four news organisations tended to gravitate to the business and political elite for information and opinion and, with the possible exception of the *Guardian/Observer*, generally excluded the views of individuals and organisations critical of neoliberalism and big business. Most significantly, the analysis revealed that the political content of the BBC's reporting had far more in common with newspapers traditionally associated with the *right* than the *left*²⁶.

The power of words

Although it is too early to make an accurate assessment, the signs suggest that Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour Party leader has broadened BBC journalists' field of economic

20 Stiglitz (2002, 2003, 2007), Krugman (2008), Soros (1998)

21 For example, Chomsky (1998), Klein (2000, 2008), Monbiot (2001), Pilger (2002), Bakan (2004), Piketty (2014)

22 The researchers questioned 29,000 people in 27 countries

23 BBC World Service (2009)

24 Berry (2012)

25 Merrill (2015)

26 Ibid.

vision. Indeed, the BBC and other news organisations are compelled to report on exchanges in Westminster. So if, for example, Corbyn presses for higher corporation tax, the British public will be exposed to arguments that had previously resided on the periphery. This certainly represents a welcome extension of public debate, but it must be noted, however, that just because an issue reaches the news agenda, it doesn't mean that journalists will represent all sides equally and fairly. The language of economic and business journalism can be subtly judgemental, as illustrated from the following descriptions of a street protest before the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle in 1999.

The *Guardian's* account of the protest painted a joyful scene populated by a rainbow of well-meaning groups and individuals:

More than 60,000 people marched in carnival spirits on the conference hall. Environmentalists, students, and an eclectic array of causes, joined steel workers and dockers to fill the city centre with colour and noise²⁷

The *Times*, however, saw the same protestors as a menacing rabble and ridiculed the whole movement by highlighting a sub-group of 'feminist witches':

... a motley crew of steel workers, environmentalists, poverty campaigners and feminist witches has succeeded in outwitting the most powerful governments in the world and hijacking the WTO agenda²⁸

One might expect the BBC journalist to give a relatively plain description. But the words were clearly more in tune with those of the *Times* rather than the *Guardian*.

Anarchists, environmentalists, union members, human rights activists and religious groups have descended on Seattle. Among the protesters are Wiccans, feminist neo-pagan lovers of nature and magic, who say the WTO values free trade over the Goddess²⁹

It is evidently not sufficient for a news item to simply award exposure. To be taken seriously by the audience, an idea, a cause, a group or an individual also needs credibility, and this is created through journalists' choices of words and images. Although BBC news generally employs less colourful language than newspapers of the right, there is a demonstrable tendency to be somewhat dismissive of ideas and organisations that challenge the *status quo*.³⁰

Toward a more inclusive journalism

Despite the three studies outlined above, the economic and business news of the BBC has received relatively little interest from researchers. Consequently, the belief that the BBC is 'left-wing' in this context has never been robustly tested, and so it persists. There is scant evidence

27 Elliott and Vidal (1999)

28 Murray (1999)

29 BBC (1999)

30 Merrill (2015)

to suggest that this perception might be well-founded and research to date suggests that the converse is more likely. Indeed, the case for the antithesis was strengthened by a candid admission from the BBC's economics editor - and former business editor - Robert Peston who said the Corporation tends to follow the agenda of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*. 'If I'm honest,' he said:

... the BBC's routinely so anxious about being accused of being left-wing, it quite often veers in what you might call a very pro-establishment, [a] rather right-wing direction, so that it's not accused of that³¹

Given the importance of impartiality in BBC economic and business journalism to public debate, more research is clearly needed. The Budd Report was a useful start but it was published before a period of deep introspection for many practitioners that was prompted by the Financial Crisis.³² Furthermore, there was no comparative element and so Budd could not benchmark the BBC's output against other news providers that have distinct political positions. Hence, this paper recommends the commissioning of a post-Crisis study which assesses the extent to which the BBC and other news organisations award exposure and credence to ideas from outside of the Westminster-City of London axis. It is vital that such an inquiry is carried out with the support of BBC journalists and other editorial staff, and it is hoped that the findings of the subsequent report would inform the evolution of the BBC's economic and business output.

2,430 words

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31 Peston In Sommers (2014)

32 It is generally agreed by academics and practitioners alike that the news media as a whole failed to warn of possible negative outcomes prior to the Financial Crisis of 2007/8. See Merrill (2015:9-10 and 191-195) for a summary of the arguments

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