

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

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1. Terms of Reference

The full terms of reference are supplied as a PDF.

2. Context

The Serota review can be found here:

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/the-serota-review.pdf>

The BBC's action plan in response is here:

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/impartiality-and-editorial-standards-action-plan.pdf>

3. Main terms used in this review

We use 'fiscal policy' interchangeably with 'tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt.' We take this to include both the total levels of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt and the detail of specific taxes, plus spending on specific services like health care, etc.

We use the term 'broad impartiality' not because we're trying to

Again, we noted that all three of these areas of spending include significant elements that are devolved to the UK Nations. On government borrowing and debt, we looked mainly at the stock of national debt. Even within these limited subject areas, we had to restrict the questions we asked to make the task manageable.

5. Things we didn't include or didn't do

i) **Other areas.** It's worth noting how much that leaves out: spending on pensions and benefits, education, defence, social care, foreign aid, local government, inheritance tax, corporation tax, council tax, etc., etc.

ii) **Labelling.** We agreed to look at contributor affiliations but although some of our interviewees felt annoyed at how they're labelled, we didn't think the issues related specifically enough to fiscal policy, so we'd be overstepping our brief by giving a general opinion. But we wonder if the editorial guidelines could give more detail about which labels to use, whether they should be agreed by contributors, whether they should have a consistent political format, etc. Since labels need to be short, we feel that information about a contributor's economic perspective is best introduced during the interview, as relevant.

Potential conflicts of interest, however, can be especially relevant to tax and spending decisions, and we note concern about these – or rather concern when references to them are missing. A formal declaration of interest before every interview would be unwieldy, so we think it's best dealt with in the interview itself, but again we think Editorial Policy could consider that in the round.

iii) **Tone:** We were asked to consider the tone of interviews. On reflection, we again felt wary of trying to reach general conclusions about this through the lens of fiscal policy. The tone of interviews could be the subject of a limited, more general review, which would benefit from including political interviews, interviews of differing lengths, interviews conducted live and those pre-recorded to be edited prior to broadcast, for different outlets, etc. The subject of the interview seems to us only one of the factors likely to be relevant, and perhaps in this case not an especially significant one.

6. Methods of analysis

The terms of reference listed various suggested methodologies .

i) Content analysis.

Analysing BBC output across all its platforms for a period long enough for us to be confident that we'd pick up the full range of political inflections, then to score

We did not attempt to be exhaustive, as we say, but the programmes in our sample included:

TV:

BBC ONE:

Breakfast

BBC News at One

BBC News at Six

BBC News at Ten

BBC Weekend News

Newscast

Panorama

Question Time

Sunday Morning

The Andrew Marr Show

BBC TWO:

BBC News

Morning Live

Newsnight

Politics Live

BBC THREE

The Catch-Up

CBBC:

Newsround

Nations:

BBC Northern Ireland Evening News - Newsline

BBC Scotland Evening News - Reporting Scotland

BBC Scotland & BBC ONE Scotland - Debate Night

BBC Scotland - The Nine

BBC Wales Evening News - Wales Today

Nolan Live

News Channel:

BBC News

Outside Source

Regional News, including:

- BBC London, East Midlands Today, Look East, Look North, Midlands Today, North West Tonight, Points West, South East Today and South Today and Spotlight.
- Politics East, Politics London, Politics Midlands, Politics North, Politics North West, Politics South and Politics South West.

Radio became available on the BBC Archive Search in the latter part of the review. We sampled the following programmes :

BBC Radio 1:
Newsbeat

BBC Radio 2:
Jeremy Vine

BBC Radio 4:
Analysis
Any Questions?
Budget Day 2021
File on 4
Money Box
PM
Six O'clock News
The Backlog
The Briefing Room
The Westminster Hour
The World at One
Today

BBC Radio 5Live:
Drive
Nicky Campbell
Wake Up to Money

We also looked at about 1,000 online items , and did a number of exploratory searches of everything that was available in archive , sampling at random.

In all, we looked at about 11,000 items across TV, Radio and Online, as we say, identifying about 1,000 for closer analysis.

ii) Interviews.

We interviewed over 100 people, roughly half inside, half outside the BBC, often at length. We aimed for a variety of perspectives but there were some limitations. One was the subject matter. For example, plenty of people know about personal

v) Survey of social media activity.

We were invited to look for any express or revealed bias in social media use over the period. This entailed examining posts over the duration of the review period to see if they revealed bias over time.

groups included. We also note that it says it's now trying to do something about it.

We could also have compared

