



Communications and Digital Committee

Corrected oral evidence: BBC impartiality and editorial standards

Tuesday 14 December 2021

2.15 pm

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Members present: Baroness Buscombe (The Chair); Baroness Bull; Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Featherstone; Lord Foster of Bath; Lord Gilbert of Panteg; Lord Griffiths of Burry Port; Lord Lipsey; Baroness Rebuck; Lord Stevenson of Balmacara; Baroness Stowell of Beeston; Lord Vaizey of Didcot; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 12

Witnesses

I: Roger Mosey, former Head of Television News, BBC; Sarah Sands, former Editor, "Today" programme, BBC Radio 4; Professor Richard Sambrook, former Director of Global News, BBC.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Roger Mosey, Sarah Sands and Professor Richard Sambrook.

Q1 The Chair: Welcome, everybody, to this session of the Communications and Digital Committee in the House of Lords. This will be broadcast online and a transcript will be taken.

I begin by welcoming our three witnesses today: Roger Mosey, Professor Richard Sambrook and Sarah Sands. Thank you, all three of you, for joining us today. You can see that some of us are here and some of us are virtual, given the latest state of affairs with Covid. I apologise for that in the sense that it is always better if we can be all together. Thank you for joining us.

We were keen to have this session today, which is focusing on editorial standards and impartiality at the BBC. It follows another session that we had in January this year and it follows the Serota review, which of course followed the Bashir debacle, if I can call it that. We were particularly keen to have the three witnesses before us today, because all three of you are former BBC editors. Of course, in a sense, because you are former, you can perhaps be a little more candid than you might otherwise be in giving us your points of view in response to questions we will ask you now.

First, say a little bit about yourselves and perhaps explain what you do now.

Roger Mosey: I am a former editor of the “Today” programme, like Sarah. I was head of television news with Richard as my boss. I was on the BBC journalism board for a number of years, and now I am master of Selwyn College, Cambridge.

Sarah Sands: I was editor of the “Today” programme rather fleetingly for about three years compared to the BBC veterans, the other panellists. I was a newspaper editor before that and now I have a portfolio of different roles, including some consultancy. I am a trustee for Index on Censorship and chair of the Bright Blue think tank.

Professor Richard Sambrook: I was a BBC journalist for 30 years, mainly in television. I spent 10 years on the board of management as director of sport, then director of news and then director of global news and the World Service. I left 12 years ago and am now emeritus professor at Cardiff University, where I am teaching and involved in research projects, including reviews of impartiality on or for the BBC.

The Chair: Thank you. Let us begin this session with our first question, from the Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Q2 The Lord Bishop of Worcester: Good afternoon. Since we are on first-name terms, mine is John. I am not always referred to as “the Lord Bishop of Worcester”. It is good to be able to benefit this afternoon from your wisdom and experience and the fact that you do not need to be parti pris.

I want to prefix my question by referring to a debate that the Archbishop of Canterbury hosted on freedom of speech last Friday in the House. He talked about what his predecessor William Temple called the intermediate institutions of society and how important they are in a properly functioning democracy. I quote from his speech. He said, "One of the most important, I want to say myself, is the BBC, in both its domestic and World Service versions. Of course it gets things wrong, but its continual history of being banned by tyrants, which goes on to this day, demonstrates the fear that impartial reporting—true freedom of speech—generates in those who seek to stifle all liberty. The BBC usually speaks both frankly, but also fittingly." It is worth getting those words on record in this context.

Do you feel that the BBC's policy of due impartiality is fit for purpose?

Sarah Sands: I am glad that you used that quote. Still, when we talk about the World Service, it is where everyone feels safest and happiest, probably, in talking about public service at the BBC and impartiality. I listened to a leaving interview with Mary Hockaday on Feedback the other day and was struck by the sheer level of satisfaction among listeners and the sense of Reithian purpose that she had in all that she talked about.

To stress, I am here perhaps as much as an observer as a participant, because I was there for three years, which is not the usual time for BBC people. That does, by the way, slightly affect some of their attitudes.

I found impartiality to be serious and absolutely imbedded. From when I arrived, just about the first person I met was the person in charge of editorial policy guidelines, so I understood it. Also, you live it. On something like the "Today" programme, every story or interview is tested in a way I had not quite realised. Those of you who have been on it will know how a producer will probably speak to you before.

The news on the "Today" programme is mostly what people say, so the sense of fairness, accuracy and balance is more discussed than anything else. It certainly struck me as a core obligation of the BBC, all the more so with the strengthening up post the Serota review, I am sure.

James Harding, the head of news when I was there, had made what was quite a bold statement for a journalist when he talked about it being better to be second and right. That slightly changes your approach. I am still struck by how breaking BBC news comes slightly later on your phone than others. That, I hope, is because of that verification process.

Professor Richard Sambrook: Impartiality is always a work in progress and is always evolving, because the market, social expectations, the range of services and the process of production required for them change, so how you deliver impartiality has to be constantly reviewed and developed. The BBC holds itself to a higher standard than the Ofcom broadcasting code requires, because it expects impartiality across all its output, not just news and current affairs, which is what Ofcom focuses on, and across its digital services and so on. It

takes it seriously. It thinks about it, reviews it and develops its approach to it constantly.

It is a complicated area. I want to say a couple of things without getting too academic about it, but they are important.

Impartiality is often subjective. What you think is impartial may not be what I think is impartial. Even the Ofcom code has a degree of subjectivity in it; it recognises the importance of audience expectations to how due impartiality is applied. Impartiality for one channel might not quite work in the same way as impartiality for another channel. It is a flexible standard in that sense.

It is also widely misunderstood in public debate as being about false balance, or about covering up your personal opinions, or being bland "he said, she said" journalism. Impartiality, properly employed, is the reverse of that. It is a set of professional disciplines to elevate your journalism beyond personal bias and beyond those kinds of problems when it is properly employed, but that is not well understood generally.

Impartiality becomes better and easier to deal with when you start to break it down into its constituent parts. What do we mean by impartiality? Accuracy, fairness, an evidence base, a diversity of view, transparency of process and those kinds of things. When you break those down, you can start to engage with them more, start to measure them, start to evaluate performance against them in easier ways. The Serota review, and the BBC's 10-point plan in response to it, was encouraging in that the BBC started to look at how you train on those sorts of areas and at the constituent parts of impartiality and how it is applied.

Moving news teams across the UK will be quite difficult to manage, but it will also undoubtedly help with diversity of views and so on. Bringing in external reviews of editorial output is also a positive development. It used to happen under the BBC Trust. It fell away. It is coming back. An external perspective brought into the BBC's view of how it is performing is an important element.

Roger Mosey: I agree overwhelmingly with Sarah and Richard. The BBC is the classic good deed in a cruel world, and we need it.

I will add to what they said. It is quite interesting to work back from the Serota report to the questions that Tim Davie, as director-general, is rightly addressing. The challenges to impartiality include the fact that some younger journalists do not understand it in the way it was classically imbued into BBC journalists over the years. There is no particular reason why they should, because they have not in some cases had the right training.

Secondly, of course, social media is all around us, so defining impartiality becomes ever tougher because social media provides so many challenges. Also, the external definition of due impartiality has broadened. Ofcom seems to have allowed originally LBC, which is a great radio station, and now GB News to have a slightly different interpretation of due impartiality from the way it did 10 or 15 years ago. Unquestionably, identity politics has had some impact on the BBC. There

is absolutely proper concern about diversity within the BBC, which then sometimes rubs against diversity of opinion externally and provides more challenges for journalists.

The Lord Bishop of Worcester: Given what you say about impartiality being a work in progress, it is a moving target and it changes across time. If we could dig a bit deeper, I am interested to note that Jonathan Munro, deputy director of BBC news, said recently in an interview that "due impartiality" means that "if reasonable people can hold an alternative view"—on a subject—"then it is contested, in which case impartiality kicks in full throttle". He went on to compare the flat Earth theory—"unreasonable for debate", with Brexit—"reasonable".

Nevertheless, there are a lot of questions about what a reasonable person is and what counts as a legitimate or alternative view. As you have suggested, there might be subjectivity involved in this. Undoubtedly there is.

Also, Roger, you have implied that maybe impartiality as classically understood in the BBC is not as well understood latterly as it might be. There is work going on to address that, but I wonder what you feel needs to be done, given the complexity of impartiality.

Richard, you apologised for being a bit academic. One needs to be quite academic if one is to understand the nuances and complexity of this. Can you expand a bit further on where the lacunae are and what needs to be done?

Roger Mosey: Yes. Training is absolutely essential to this, and it is important that people get that sense of classic BBC values. They have stood the BBC in good stead for the best part of 100 years.

I will pick apart a bit the idea of impartiality on settled subjects. Of course it is right that you do not have people on saying that the earth is flat. Equally, on Brexit, it does not mean that you simply represent one side of the argument and the other side of it without any analysis.

When I spoke to this committee a couple of years ago, I said, and I stand by this, that it is possible to say that the overwhelming argument of economists on Brexit was that Britain would be poorer outside the EU. There were times when Kamal Ahmed and BBC and Robert Peston on ITV said that, but it did not filter into as much coverage as maybe it should have done. Equally, there was an argument that if you want to be more independent and have control over immigration policy and a whole set of other issues, you should vote to leave. There simply was no equal balance of UK autonomy in the two arguments. During the Brexit referendum, there was a rather robotic impartiality that did not help to guide people to facts.

Exactly as Richard said, impartiality does not mean being bloodless and passionless. You have also to give expert judgment on the key issues of our time.

Professor Richard Sambrook: I agree with Roger. If you look back 20 or 30 years to the dark ages, when I first joined the BBC, impartiality

was getting one voice from the Conservative Party and one voice from the Labour Party, and occasionally someone from the then Liberal Party. That was impartiality. You felt that you had the spectrum of public opinion covered. I am not sure it even washed then, but it certainly does not wash today.

There are at least a couple of obvious challenges. One is how you reflect the broad spectrum of diversity of views—quite often, you have only a minute and a half to do it, or maybe a bit longer on a programme like the “Today” programme—and whether, to reflect that diversity of view, you simply go to the political debate in Westminster or look at stakeholders and experts beyond that and at how a greater range of voices is legitimately heard.

That was one of the problems with the Brexit debate, as well as the things that Roger identified. Of course he is right that false equivalence is the other big trap. To say, “Ten people say this and one person says that, but we will have one from each side”, is obviously the wrong thing to do.

The BBC has invested over many years in specialist expertise, specialist correspondents, and specialist editors as they now call them. Their job is to make those interpretations, to give that weighting and to help to guide people through that weighting, which by and large they do extremely well. The difficulty is that, quite often, professional judgments can get confused for personal opinion, particularly on social media. Signalling and transparency come in here. Correspondents make a professional judgment about where the balance of something should be weighted. They need to explain why it is a professional judgment and what that is based on, as well as simply saying, “You should believe X and not Y”. It becomes more complicated.

Social media has complicated it further. The fact that society has opened up a lot more over the last few decades has also made it imperative that the BBC finds ways to reflect a much broader range of opinion.

The Lord Bishop of Worcester: Sarah, in a self-deprecatory manner you said that you were at the “Today” programme for only three years. That is long enough to get a degree at Selwyn. Maybe you did not go as native as you might have done had you been there for a lifetime. Your perspective is important.

Sarah Sands: Thank you. Yes, I have been thinking about what I observed and about impartiality. Everyone is signed up to impartiality. No one disputes impartiality.

However, I noticed two things. One was that although individuals have different views, the BBC is slightly institutionally statist, so stories tended to be about crises that could often be solved by more government spending, for instance—that government is the problem and government is the answer. I noticed that a bit and I do not know quite how you catch that. It is probably about awareness—you have to think of the institution you work for. A lot of people have worked there an awfully

long time, so there is probably not quite the diversity of experience that would give a different perspective.

It was apparent that the BBC is built on the fault line between public service news and entertainment. Both are valid, but there is a conflict. As the BBC makes different demands on its presenters, for instance to be warmer and more accessible and to reveal more of themselves, you have to be slightly careful of that line. That is when it gets into things like social media, which Richard investigated. That makes a difference, because the point of social media is to win personal popularity on the whole, which starts to distort behaviour. To me, reporting is the noblest of all journalistic traits, and I was always sorry about the hierarchy that a reporter is good, a presenter is better and a presenter who can get onto "Strictly" or something is at the top. That seemed a pity, because that sober and factual reporting from wherever is rather marvellous.

In terms of representation, I tried to take the "Today" programme out of Westminster so that we did not hear the same voices all the time. You do not necessarily get impartiality that way. I thought I was being quite clever by taking the programme around universities. I thought we would get young people who would also be interested in current affairs and get representation around the country, but of course there are inbuilt political positions from people of a certain age. All these things, as Richard said, make it complicated. You need to have the intent and to do it in good faith. That I definitely saw.

Q3 **Baroness Bull:** I have a thought that perhaps you might bear in mind as you answer future questions. Richard, you mentioned trust, and I am interested in the relationship between trust and impartiality. You talked about it in the context of social media and perhaps people diminishing levels of trust through their engagement on social media. I am interested to hear your thoughts on that relationship between trust and impartiality.

I have a more direct question for Richard because of his experience in universities. As you may remember, I was on the Programme Complaints Committee at the BBC for a while and was struck by the changing view of what was considered offensive and what was considered decent. This has differed over time. I had not considered the idea that impartiality would change so much over time, and I am interested in that idea.

With your experience in universities, Richard, and dealing with students, do you think there is a significant generational difference in how impartiality is viewed? I will not ask everybody to come in because I am aware that we have lots of people queuing up, so I will direct it to Richard and then leave others to come in if they like. Thank you.

Professor Richard Sambrook: Thank you, Deborah. First, on the relationship between impartiality and trust, everyone is seeking ways to shore up trust at the moment, because we have seen a decline across the media as we have across many other institutions. For media organisations and particularly public service organisations, it is absolutely linked to impartiality.

Certainly the surveys that I have seen have said that people want to see impartial news. We are awash with opinion generally in public debate at the moment, particularly on social media but in lots of other places as well. We are swamped with opinion. Therefore, providing information, facts and evidence on which people can then make their own judgments is prized highly. We saw that to a large degree during the pandemic when people, including young people, who may have had nothing else to do of course, turned to traditional television bulletins in a way we have not seen for a while. A large part of that was because they did trust that they would get information they could rely on and that was therefore impartial. Trust and impartiality are closely linked. Trust is more complicated than that, but impartiality is a core part of it.

The generational point that you make is one of the challenges at the moment. If I talk to students about impartiality and I say that a large part of impartiality is fairness, they might respond by saying that fairness is about social justice. Then I have to backtrack and say that that is not just what it is about and I try to reframe the argument. It comes to the identity politics point that Roger raised. They have a different concept of what is right.

We are in a culture of calling things out and trying to find truth. A lot of this is fed by trying to find things that they can rely upon in an argumentative environment where things do not seem as solid as they might have done in the past. We have a generation that does not see it in quite the same way as previous generations might have done. Having said that, when you talk to them and take them through it and they realise what impartiality is—a set of disciplines to help them and support them to do strong journalism—they buy into it. But it takes quite a lot to talk them through it and get them to understand that impartiality is not about bland journalism. It is about supporting stronger journalism.

Q4 Baroness Stowell of Beeston: Good afternoon, everybody. I should declare that I am a former colleague of Richard and Roger.

I wanted to come back to the notion of impartiality evolving. Roger, you talked about Brexit. Beyond Brexit, we now see other matters that some people perceive as political but that do not sit neatly within party boundaries. How do you see that as challenging the notion of impartiality within the BBC, and how it is possible to still be impartial in that environment?

From a slightly different perspective, I have noticed lately a similar kind of challenge that is now quite common among different journalists, even journalists who have been in the BBC a long time, and that is a willingness to express their own personal emotion in response to a new story that they are reporting on. What is your view of that? What does it mean for impartiality? I will start with Roger and, as Deborah suggested, if anybody else wants to add to it, they can.

Roger Mosey: As proof of my dinosaur status, I am not keen on emotion from correspondents. It is best without that.

You are absolutely right about the different challenges of impartiality in modern Britain. There was an example of this two years ago, which I was interested in. You will remember the debate in Birmingham about teaching young children about LGBT people. The dispute was between the school and some conservative religious parents. I was interested at the time that the BBC sent its LGBT correspondent there, who did a piece that in many ways was impartial but that came—as mine would have done, frankly—from the point of view that this teaching was right.

However, the problem in modern Britain is that conservative religious groups and people of faith generally pay licence fees too, and just by sending that correspondent you edge on to one side of the argument rather than the other. There is sometimes a lack of understanding of conservative groups, faith groups and older people. You have to make sure that if you want impartiality, you understand why they think what they do. It does not mean that you agree with them but that you represent them fairly.

After the Brexit debate, Brexit voters were portrayed as angry people in fish and chip shops in Clacton, and that was not the right picture. That can damage impartiality as much as what looks like an unfair report.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston: I know you are not there anymore, but, from what you understand—maybe this is a question for Richard—is that starting to be understood within the organisation? Does BBC news management get that?

Roger Mosey: Tim Davie gets it, which is why he is doing what he is doing on impartiality.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston: Richard, do you want to add anything on that?

Professor Richard Sambrook: Yes, briefly. I also do not like emotion. That was encouraged at one point to try to make items more accessible, warm hearted, human interest, easier to identify with and all the rest of it. It is not particularly good. There are all sorts of risks around impartiality when you go down that line.

I detect a slightly more sober tone returning to some parts of the BBC's reporting, which I encourage because it is quite important to have a more straightforward, factual, evidence-based approach to reporting, off which there can then be discussion and debate and so on as well. It is the broadcasting equivalent of separating news and opinion or debate. These have been merged together in some programmes, and in some ways we need a bit of a move to separate them out more fully.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston: Thank you.

The Chair: Sarah, you touched on this when you talked a moment ago about more serious reporting. I was thinking of people like Kate Adie and slightly lamenting, because when you have something like that from your own correspondent, it is so utterly brilliant because emotion does not come into it very much. It is a load of factual, fantastic reporting, and we just do not get enough of that, in my view. I felt that you were

empathising a bit with how I feel in that sense.

Sarah Sands: I am absolutely with you. Again, when people are pleased with the BBC, it is so often about things like that, or foreign reporting, Lyse Doucet is someone I am very keen on. She is certainly empathetic, but her role is to report; it is not about how she feels. I do think that is where the BBC still scores very highly. It gets into trouble when it moves away from that.

The Chair: Maybe it is also about the way they talk to us, the listener and the viewer. In "Countryfile", for example, I feel that they talk to people as if they are five and know nothing about farming, which is incredibly patronising. I guess I am throwing in my opinion now, rather than just being the Chair.

Sarah Sands: That is an interesting question about representation. Of course, the great disrupter there was Clarkson and "Clarkson's Farm". I am in Norfolk where Clarkson is a great hero because he spoke for farmers, but he also managed to represent them in a way that "Countryfile" did not. It is an excellent BBC programme that tells you about nature, but it is a bit like a school nature trip by comparison.

Sometimes you can say that you are representing everyone, and it is very hard to say that you must represent everyone, and that everyone can be happy as a result, but that tends to take you into very non-controversial areas like baking. There are good impulses for social cohesion, but sometimes it means that you do not have a feel for some of the people you are meant to be representing. I think that is where it can sometimes show.

Q5 Lord Lipsey: I wonder whether we do not get into a somewhat black and white situation by using an analogy—as we did on what is allowed and what is not allowed—based on Brexit and flat earth. I mean, it is clearly legitimate to argue about Brexit. On flat earth, there is no doubt about the fact.

I will give a couple of examples of difficulties I see arising from this oversimplification. One is over anti-vax. I was in a park yesterday talking to a middle-aged black man about why he was not being vaccinated. I did not find his arguments convincing, but I thought it would be a very good thing if more people heard him talk, because they would have understood more of the emotion that lay behind that. If you have strict impartiality and do not allow anything that is not true, that does not happen.

There are also areas where it is absolutely impossible to have a discussion between the two sides, the main one at the moment being trans versus feminism. Certainly the trans people do not think that the feminists should be allowed to speak. You cannot, surely, give way to that kind of veto power, yet the trans people regard the feminists as being outwith the bounds of reason.

What I think I am asking is whether it is not necessary to have a more sophisticated and nuanced view of what is involved with impartiality than

what we frequently hear, for example, in the Brexit/flat earth analogy.

Professor Richard Sambrook: I absolutely understand what you are saying, but I think we do have a more sophisticated view. I do not think there is anything in either of the examples you have given that would prevent those appearing on a BBC news programme. I can absolutely see that. There may well have been a programme exploring why anti-vaxxers feel as strongly as they do. I would be disappointed if the BBC had not covered that in some way on one of its programmes.

Equally, in the slightly fraught debate over transgender rights and so on at the moment, although it is very difficult, it is not impossible to mount that discussion. I have just read the latest edition of *Prospect* in which two people explore that in entirely responsible ways. You could do that on television or on radio in the same way if you found the right individuals. I think it would be a public service to do so.

I do not think there is anything in the current structure of impartiality that would prevent something as sophisticated or as nuanced as the examples that you give.

Lord Lipsey: But you have not been able to cite any example of programmes that have done this. All you are saying is that it should be perfectly all right. I think there is a terror of doing programmes that do that sort of thing.

Professor Richard Sambrook: I would be very disappointed if that were true. You may be right. I have not seen either of those, but then I am not monitoring as much output. One of the delights of leaving the BBC 12 years ago was that I do not have to listen to and watch absolutely everything that is broadcast every minute of the day. I would be disappointed if there was nobody in the BBC who felt that they were able to do those things.

Q6 Viscount Colville of Culross: I also declare an interest, having been a colleague of Richard's and all the rest of you at the BBC.

There are huge cuts going on in news and current affairs at the moment. Five hundred jobs are going over three years, as I understand it. You have all been editors of individual programmes and you understand the importance of having all those different voices. The problem is going to be that, with fewer journalists, there will be much more centralisation, and much more control by news gathering, so I understand.

One of the great complaints about the BBC is that it has a metropolitan bias, and that people outside London do not see it as being impartial; they see it as being London-centric. Do you feel there is a danger that this centralisation could make the BBC even more London-centric, despite the efforts that we are seeing to diversify production across the nations and regions?

Professor Richard Sambrook: Hi, Charles. It is nice to see you. I think there is a danger with job losses, but I do not think it is that danger. A number of the teams have been relocated around the UK in ways that I think will enable the full spectrum of the UK to be reflected better. I

think they are addressing that in the way they have restructured it. I am more optimistic on the front that you are worried about.

What worries me more is the sudden loss of expertise, which I think will be a shock to the editorial system. You are seeing a lot of faces or voices which all of us are very familiar with. It may well be healthy to have turnover and to encourage fresh talent up. Those things are good, but to have so much in such a short period of time is a significant shock to the system, and the sudden loss of expertise worries me.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Roger, you have written about this, I think.

Roger Mosey: Yes. I am a bit more worried than Richard about the centralisation point. I would absolutely admit that at times, when I was running TV news, editors were fighting like rats in a sack and there were lots of different agendas, which were probably a bit too diverse. I am worried that it has now gone too much the other way and that there is just one central news machine that allocates more to the various programmes than in the old days. I think that needs to be watched.

I am also a bit worried that the regional dispersal of people does not give enough power to the regions. Ideally, news board members should be in regions, and you want to hear that Manchester has overruled London, rather than the other way around. It is still the case that almost all decisions speed their way back to a small piece of real estate in W1A. I would like Glasgow, Cardiff and Salford to be taking those decisions. Then, I think, you would get more diversity of thought and opinion.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Would you not get that if you had all the science people moving to Cardiff or Glasgow, for instance? Would you then not get the experts on science coming from the nations?

Roger Mosey: You would. I think the question is this: who is writing the running orders? The "Today" programme, the "News at Ten" and "Newsnight" are all still in London, so they must go through that filter to get on air. What you want is some strong output heads and the real decision-makers to be in the nations and regions. That would be the rebalancing that would fight against the central machine control, which has certainly increased.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Sarah, do you have a view on centralisation and what it means for the London-centric view of the BBC?

Sarah Sands: Every editor wants to be captain of their own ship, so it is less fun for editors. The pros and cons are noted in the Serota report, I think. The pros are that it is efficient, but also that you control stories better if you do not have them all over the place. There will probably be fewer mistakes, but it can also create an amplification effect, so if you just have a few stories that speak to the BBC you do not get the diversity that you get among the teams. Fighting among themselves to get exclusives and so on is part of the joy. Some fighting is necessary.

Q7

Baroness Featherstone: A real-world example came across my screen, and I want to know how the BBC should be viewing the impartiality and

what decisions would be made. It is not an issue that I know that much about, but there was some film footage of a bus of Hasidic Jews being shouted at and spat at by Arab or Muslim people in the street. Everyone condemned that, obviously. Then there was another report that the Hasids inside the bus had chanted anti-Arab stuff back. Then there was something from I do not know which organisation, presumably a Jewish organisation, that said that that should not have been said, because there was no evidence that that was shouted back.

How would you begin to disseminate and know what was right and wrong and what to report on something like that? Obviously feelings run high on the issue, and different partisan sides would want you to go different ways. Where is the impartial line on that?

Professor Richard Sambrook: On these kinds of issues, the answer, as Sarah said earlier, is first-hand reporting. It is obviously difficult if you do not witness it directly, but you must try to speak to people and find out through factual reporting what happened, and make that as thorough as you can. There is the old cliché that journalism is only the first rough draft of history, but rather than trying to make a judgment about it, try to find out what the facts are and present the facts.

It reminds me a bit of discussing impartiality with students who ask, "How do you report genocide impartially?" The answer is, "With first-hand reporting and evidence". They think of it only in terms of opinion, but I say, "No, you have to go on the ground and find out what happened, and present the first-hand evidence of what has happened". That is how you get through, if you are able to do that. Of course, it is not always possible when it is the other side of the world and not directly witnessed.

Baroness Featherstone: When it comes to public trust, we are looking for trusted providers of news, and all of us are confused. How do we know if they have done that?

Professor Richard Sambrook: If they can send somebody and you see them there, that is one thing. I do think that one of the things that impartiality will rest on will be better signalling, and therefore transparency, of process. Let the listener or the viewer understand what you have done, and why you have done it, to reach the position in the report that you are presenting.

These days, to encourage trust we must find more ways of doing that. It is very difficult to do that in a minute and a half on the 10 o'clock news, but there are ways of signalling the process that has gone on in order that people understand how these reports are put together and the process that sits behind it. Quite often, all media organisations talk in a shorthand that I do not think the public always understand. Opening that up a little bit will be crucial for all organisations, not just the BBC.

Baroness Featherstone: Yes. There are so many huge clashes between passionate believers in whatever—on trans, on Palestine, on all these clash subjects—and the only means is if we can trust you to give us the truth, so this is hugely important.

Q8 **Lord Griffiths of Burry Port:** I am remote, as if I am suffering from leprosy or something. It is good to see all of you in the flesh.

I wanted to touch base with a question from David Lipsey, again about the journalist who goes to present the news in an impartial way. My wife is a radiotherapist and has worked with an oncology team in one of London's leading teaching hospitals, and she worked for a long time in Whitehall in a very Islamic part of London. She is utterly detached from the situations of human suffering that she meets. She has been conditioned by the science and the learning that has formed her, but the patients, women, Muslims, sense an empathy in her and see in her demeanour something that engenders trust.

That suggests to me that impartiality is not simply a kind of absolutist position that favours neither this way nor that way, but one that takes to a situation that is being reported the need to be detached, factual and all the rest of it, but at the same time is not devoid of the possibility of the human being doing the reporting coming across as a human being. I do not mean emotion and all of that. I wonder what our team members would think about some of that. There is more to impartiality than simply soullessness.

Roger Mosey: I agree. I think we have all been saying that there is a lot of complexity in impartiality. Going back to the point raised earlier, which I think you touched on, you can allow for human emotions, absolutely. However, something like vaccination, for example, seems to me to be analogous with climate change, in that there is an overwhelming body of scientific opinion—in the example of vaccination that it is a good thing. If you allow a human view that dissents from that to dominate or to make the piece all about human emotions and not about the science, that is where you lose out. The underpinning of seeking the truth is key.

I know we have at least one distinguished economist on this panel. Some science seems to me to be pretty fixed, and 100 economists saying something at times is slightly more problematic than 100 climate change scientists saying something. You cannot be absolutely firm on "fact", but you do try to get truth at the heart of reporting.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port: There is no dispute about that, and I do not want to prolong this discussion much longer, but who is the "you" who is doing the search for truth in that way? You are still you, at the end of the day, and I just feel that if you are not permitting anything "you" to be part of what you are reporting, trust depends on other things than simple, clinical addressing of factual matters.

I think you know from the way somebody talks about an earthquake or vaccines or whatever that they are interested in the question. Why should they not be interested in the question? Of course they want to bring the truth out of the situation that they are reporting, but who is the you? Who is the reporter? Are they utterly devoid of the humanity that they leave at home or in their locker before they come out to do their reporting? It is all much more complicated, I think.

Sorry if I missed some of the earlier discussion. As a member of the

communications committee, I find that I was out of communication, I am sorry to admit.

Professor Richard Sambrook: I would simply say that I do think you get a sense of the “you” from the best correspondents and reporters. If you saw John Simpson or Jeremy Bowen, and certainly Kate Adie and so on, in the past, you absolutely had a sense of who they were as individuals, and the trust that you had in them and in their authority was because they brought something of themselves to their reporting. I think we have some excellent foreign correspondents at the moment, not just in the BBC but across British television, who bring that quality as well. I absolutely recognise and agree with what you are saying, but I do not detect a lack of it on air.

Q9 **Lord Gilbert of Panteg:** Thank you to the witnesses for a very interesting session so far. We have talked quite a bit about the editorial processes that you need to have in place to deliver impartiality. You have also talked quite a bit about diversity of thought and perspective.

I want to focus a bit on newsrooms now and the people who deliver the news. Is diversity of thought that important? Can you deliver impartial news if you do not have diversity of thought in your newsrooms, or is it truly very difficult, or impossible, to deliver impartial news if you do not have a range of different thoughts and opinions going into the thinking?

You have all talked about this today. Have you all spoken about it outside as well? I guess I am thinking about a point that David Jordan, the director of editorial policy and standards at the BBC, made. He recognised and understood the danger of group think. I think he implicitly thought that it was a problem at the BBC to some extent and that it led to some misfire on coverage of some issues.

I will start by asking each of the witnesses whether diversity of thought is critical to being able to deliver impartiality, or does it not matter that much?

Roger Mosey: Diversity of thought does matter. I was thinking the other day about one of my happiest times at the BBC. I was working on “World at One”, where we had people from Northern Ireland, Scotland, people from ethnic minorities, people from all around the place, except that we were all 20 or 30-something, all living in London, and pretty much all of us had been to university, so if you wanted to know what car workers in Sunderland or hill farmers in Brecon were thinking, we did not really know.

It is about trying to be as imaginative as you can in thinking yourselves into other people’s positions. Having as much knowledge of the UK as possible really does help, but sometimes you need people in the newsroom who will slightly argue with the consensus. That goes to Sarah’s point earlier about a statist response. Sometimes you think, “What if this were left to private enterprise?” or “What if you tried a different approach of not feeding money into a particular lame duck?”

That is where, in order to get the full range of perspective, you need diversity of thought in a newsroom. The easy bit is party-political balance. Anybody can give you 30 seconds of Labour, 30 seconds of Tories and 30 seconds of Lib Dems or SNP, but that is a functional party-political balance. Getting a true diversity of opinion on the airways needs diversity of the newsroom population.

Sarah Sands: Diversity of thought and challenge is what is needed, because otherwise, particularly in a big, centralised newsroom, it is tempting to go for the orthodoxies. If there was one lesson from Brexit, it was certainly about challenging orthodoxy. That may be about having the one awkward voice. When I was at the "Today" programme, that would have been John Humphrys. I always remember a rather marvellous interview with the former Archbishop of York talking about Notre Dame, when he said, "We are all praying. Of course we are all praying". We all nodded, and John said, "What are you praying for?" It was a very John question, but those awkward questions pose the challenges. Otherwise, the stories tend to form themselves, because there are stories that are easy to tell. As I say, challenge in this age, of all times, is good.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: Richard, do you think that the BBC has a problem with diversity of thought leading to group think?

Professor Richard Sambrook: It has been guilty of group think in the past, for sure, as have probably all media organisations. It is true that at times the newsroom is overly white, middle-class, and university-educated, and it should be a proper ambition to have greater diversity of background, thought and perspective.

What I worry about is when you start discussing how you achieve that. I think that is the right ambition, and it should be set as an objective, but if you go too far down the road of quotas or trying to engineer it, you end up in a very difficult place. Overall, I do not like judging things by inputs. I prefer to judge them by outputs. People may say that they think the BBC news staff are too lefty, too righty, too metropolitan, too this or too that.

In a sense, all that matters is the output that they produce, and that is what they should be judged against, rather than trying to second-guess how diverse their viewpoints may be, which way they vote or what the overall mix is behind the scenes. What matters is the output and the programming, and that is something tangible that you can judge. If you think it is too consensual or too group-think, or it is going off the track, you can address it and deal with it, but judge on outputs, not inputs.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: That is interesting. I do not think you would say, however, that it does not matter if we do not have any black faces in our newsroom as long as we understand the perspective of the black community. Is that different from saying that it does not matter if we do not have a significant number of socially conservative viewpoints in our newsroom, or are they different types of diversity?

Professor Richard Sambrook: No. All of those are important. We need ethnic diversity, gender diversity, sexual diversity, political diversity. What I worry about is when people start to look at ways of managing that. If you want to start recruitment by quota, you quite quickly end up in a kind of eastern European state broadcaster position, which none of us wants. It is much better to have an overall objective that says, "Yes of course the BBC staff and the BBC newsroom need to reflect as far as possible the diversity and range of the nation", but in the end its performance must be judged on what it produces.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: That is interesting. You talked quite a bit, and raised some examples in your earlier answers, about where that diversity may not exist. Listening to previous evidence, I am thinking increasingly that the key area here—it comes back to something you said up front—is social conservatism versus social liberalism. It is not about how you cover Brexit or contentious issues, but it is that sort of broad viewpoint.

It seems to me that, if there is a fault, it is that there are not sufficiently socially conservative perspectives going into the debate and challenge that Sarah described. Richard, you are quite right that that is difficult to fix, but I noticed, Roger, that when you spoke of that story about teaching LGBT rights in schools, and described the debate between the viewpoint of the school and religious conservatives, you said that it is important that journalists understand the perspective of those religious conservatives and report it. Arguably, is it not important that there should be some people with religious conservative backgrounds in the newsroom challenging the producers and the reporters?

Roger Mosey: I am with Richard. The key thing is that the output is balanced. This is another difficult and controversial area, but I saw a report the other night about abortion in America and the Supreme Court looking at it. It had the line that women's campaigners and other smaller liberal groups were worried that this could cost the lives of women and mothers. Of course, the perspective that is never put is the religious view, which is the reason why some American Christians oppose abortion: they see it as the lives of babies being lost. It tends to be presented instead as right-wing politicians trying to rally their base.

I do not think you need social conservatism in the newsroom to get to a slightly different perspective. It is, in a way, about trying to look at the more interesting thing. Why has abortion remained such an issue in America for 50 years or more in a way that it has not in Britain? That is where a greater intellectual ambition in journalism, to put it at its most pompous, can sometimes be interesting as well as more impartial.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I will finish with Sarah, then, and your thoughts on that and your sense of the danger of group think in covering some of these issues in the BBC as it is now.

Sarah Sands: As we were saying earlier, curiosity sorts a lot of this out. People like Jon Ronson are just genuinely interested in the views that other people hold. Some of it is just about the tone and approach, so that you do not immediately turn something into something that is inflammatory but something where people feel free to speak. Of course,

it also links up to free speech. I would hate to see speech being crushed by group think. Curiosity towards other people should be central to journalism, and there is a great danger if you lose that.

Lord Gilbert of Panteg: I was going to come back to the impact of the influence of staff networks on editorial decision-making in the BBC, but we are probably a little bit pushed for time.

The Chair: Thank you. The next question is also really important and is to do with editorial standards.

Q10 **Lord Foster of Bath:** Thank you all for being here. It is a fascinating discussion. I want to broaden it out to editorial standards, which include diversity and impartiality, and I am sure that all three of you, given your experience, can quote the editorial guidelines—all 18 chapters of innumerable pages—covering everything from accuracy to conflict of interest and so on.

You will be well aware that the Serota review said that there were a number of areas where the BBC could make significant improvements to editorial standards. How, given everything you have been telling us, should the BBC measure its success in having made improvements? Do you just tick each of Serota's concerns and say, "Dealt with", which would be difficult?

You have told us that the standards will be flexible, that they will change over time, that they may well differ between BBC and other output. You suggested that some elements of impartiality are works in progress. Roger has told us that we should judge by the outputs, not the inputs. I entirely agree, but how the hell do you judge the outputs in these sorts of areas? How does the BBC know whether it has started getting it right, given the concerns expressed? Can we start with Sarah? You have had less time to digest all those 18 chapters.

Sarah Sands: I have read them all. I would say that you know when you are producing good journalism. Referring to some of the recent reporting—Afghanistan comes to mind—you know that it is good. I do not think you can entirely judge it by the number of complaints going down. Certainly on the "Today" programme there are always a relatively healthy number of complaints, and I think that is because people feel strongly about the programme. Sometimes you know that they are right and we might be wrong on something, but there is a difference between complaining because you do not like something and complaining because it is just wrong or not good enough.

The thing about the BBC is that everyone has a view, and everyone is entitled to a view. On newspapers, where it is much more "publish and be damned", as long as you are on the right side of the law there is more leeway. There is a tremendous amount of scrutiny of the BBC. I had never seen anything like it. It is held to higher standards than other organisations. Within that, you have a sense of where there is public trust and confidence, and I think it is pretty high.

Professor Richard Sambrook: The news division of the BBC has a set of editorial objectives every year, and you can measure its performance against those. As I said at the beginning, you can break down impartiality into constituent parts, so for evidence you might want to look at a few statistics. Which statistics get reported? How accurately are they reported? Are there problems with the way they are reported? On breadth of opinion and diversity of view, what range of views gets used on our various issues and subjects? Are they the right ones? Are they balanced? Are they wide enough? You can take objectives and break them down, and you can measure performance against them. That was always done in my time at the BBC, and I am sure it still goes on to a degree.

The second important thing is to have some external input into that, in a couple of ways. Have some external review and external bodies involved. I declare an interest, as Cardiff University has done a lot of them in the past and would be happy to do them again, but whether or not it is my university, external analysis is vital. Having experts in various fields who lead those reviews from outside the organisation is also very valuable. That happened in the time of the BBC Trust. It fell away. The Serota review says that it wants to do it again, which is a very good thing. The only thing with the BBC Trust in the past was that the process was rather top-heavy, long-winded and difficult, because it took a long time and there were lots of people involved. That could be a much lighter-touch and less top-heavy way of doing it. It would be more practical and more useful, and it could be done a lot more swiftly and usefully, I suspect.

The key thing is to break down some objectives, measure performance against them, decide which are the key ones to test and get some external review in. It definitely makes a difference. There have been two different reviews, about five years apart, of the way the devolved nations are reported, and there was a distinct improvement in the second study compared with the first because the lessons of the first were taken on board. These things work.

Roger Mosey: I slightly reluctantly agree with Richard. When I was an editor I hated those external reviews. I thought they were interfering and micromanaging and everything else. Richard is right, unfortunately, that they are helpful, and the nations review is particularly good. There have been others that have also been helpful, so I would support that.

I think we all agree that the BBC is a good thing and, at its best, is brilliant. I suppose the other big picture question is what went wrong in 2016 and 2019. It is probably true of all the mainstream media and all the broadcasters, but especially the BBC as a public broadcaster, that they did not really get the story and did not get what was happening in the country in 2016. The 2019 election was portrayed as being neck and neck between two unpopular leaders, and something very different happened. Whenever the next general election happens or, heaven help us, there is another referendum, you would want to have the sense that the BBC had learned the lessons of not quite getting the country, which is a problem if the whole country is paying for you.

Q11 Lord Foster of Bath: Is there a way of combining the two key things that you said? When I was involved in education, I could go into a school and smell, feel and know that it was a good school. Sarah said that you can tell if reporting is good or if the BBC is doing a good job, and so on. On the other hand, we have had to include the external reviews set against targets.

We have the real problem that you can hit the target but miss the point. Somehow or other there must be a way of bringing that together. The responsibility for that is with the board, which has a subcommittee that is meant to look at all these things and, presumably, ultimately make the judgment, perhaps trying to find a way of combining the two. Even if that happens, the public ultimately must have the confidence. I am not sure how you get from the board deciding, "Yes, we are happy", to the public having confidence. Is it by a combination of the two or just through the thematic reviews and the public having confidence? Ultimately, editorial standards are about establishing and upholding your reputation as a trustworthy resource. How do you get the public in on this?

Professor Richard Sambrook: Reviews can also take qualitative and quantitative input from the public through focus groups or through polling, to a degree.

Coming back to the transparency point, simply demonstrating the review and how it works—publishing the external findings and the BBC's response—at least allows people to see what has gone on and how they have arrived at conclusions that they have arrived at. There is a degree to which the public can have some input, and that public input can be taken into account, and transparency is probably as far as you can get in trying to provide some confidence in it.

The Chair: We have discussed editorial standards and impartiality a lot and we will discuss it a bit more, briefly. It would be great if we could talk more on another occasion about subject matter, simply. Is one reason why some people are not watching or listening to the BBC very much these days because they do not like the subject matter? Never mind the standards of editorial input or impartiality. Some people are saying that a lot of it is very negative; it is depressing. Perhaps we need to focus on something as simple as that, and then the public might be a bit more interested in getting involved and thinking, "Yes, we want something different, something a bit more positive". Anyway, over to Viscount Colville for the last question.

Q12 Viscount Colville of Culross: This is an area that we have slightly covered already, but I want to push it a bit further. Richard, when you were asked earlier whether young people were increasingly expecting emotional and opinionated news, which is what they get from their social newsfeed, your answer was that you talked to students about impartiality and strong journalism and they got it. Unfortunately, most people do not have access to your wisdom, and we hear that only 54% of under-24s—or under-34s, is it?—are watching BBC news, as opposed to 95% of over-65s. The BBC is losing its news audience. In those

circumstances, do you think there is pressure for the BBC to look at impartiality in a different way to try to push the bounds in order to be able to respond to what a young audience quite clearly expects from news?

Professor Richard Sambrook: No, I do not. Social media and digital platforms will be crucial to the future of BBC's news provision and to holding on to audiences, particularly younger audiences, but within that environment the BBC's output must be distinctive. There is no point in the BBC going down the lines of everyone else on social media, because it will not differentiate itself and it will not be providing the value that it is able to provide.

The same editorial standards need to apply on social media as apply everywhere else. That is very difficult, because the social media environment is not particularly conducive to traditional public service journalism. It is strident, argumentative, often abusive, has a very casual tone. There is rising activism, more campaigning. None of these things is very conducive to classic BBC journalism. One of the problems, I think, is that some staff are being lured in by that and are saying, "We must be part of this tide this swim, and show that we are relevant to all these debates and things that are going on". My point is that BBC journalism needs to stand apart. If it is differentiated, it is more valuable.

We have seen evidence, as I said before, that people respond to that and respect that, but it is essential that the BBC standards are consistent across all its platforms.

Roger Mosey: I have very little to add, except that I talked to students who were at Selwyn College, and the thing I find reassuring is that, even without Richard's kind tutoring, they still tend to think that the BBC is the place to go to check whether stories are true or not. They see stuff on social media and use the BBC online to check out the truth of it. That is incredibly important, and it would worry me if they did not, but I am reassured that that is true according to the BBC's own research of quite a lot of the population.

Sarah Sands: It is true that trust in the BBC in news has gone up, and, certainly through the great trauma of the pandemic and so on, that people trust BBC news. I would have thought that that is priceless. Certainly, if you are going to be a global brand, being a trusted news source is exactly where it should be.

The Chair: That brings us to the close of this afternoon's session. I thank our three witnesses, who have all been amazing. Thank you, Sarah, Roger and Richard. It has been an incredibly informative and interesting session. I am sorry we spent so long on the first question, but in fact that fed into everything else. We could go on for much longer, but thank you all very much indeed for joining us, and thank you all on the committee.