



# Drivers of perceptions of due impartiality: The BBC and the wider news landscape

Qualitative research report

June 2022



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# Executive Summary

## Background and approach

In June 2022, Ofcom published its [review of the future regulation of the BBC](#), ahead of the Government's mid-term review of the BBC's [Charter](#). Ofcom is required to carry out and publish a review on the extent to which the BBC is fulfilling its Mission and promoting each of the Public Purposes, and addressing any specific issues of concern identified by Ofcom.

Due impartiality has always been central to the BBC and its mission and purposes. Further, Ofcom has the duty to enforce due impartiality standards on BBC services.<sup>1</sup> Ofcom recognises that discussions around due impartiality are made more complex because when commentators criticise the BBC in the area of 'impartiality' they are often referring to a complex range of issues that go beyond Ofcom's statutory duties, for example to issues around the way people are reflected and see themselves on screen and whether the BBC is being respectful of views that are not necessarily the most modern.

In 2019, Ofcom conducted an in-depth [review of BBC news and current affairs](#) ('the News review') to provide a detailed insight into how people get their news, and we looked at the range and depth the BBC offers compared to other news providers. The research programme included qualitative research, deep-dive news journey research, content analysis, social media analysis and smartphone usage analysis. There were two key findings from the 2019 research that related to due impartiality:

- Contextual and non-content related factors played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of the BBC and impartiality, with perceptions influenced by the BBC brand, its funding mechanism and its portrayal across wider media, in addition to content.
- The polarised political climate presented a challenge to the BBC in how it approached due impartiality and the BBC faced greater scrutiny and higher levels of public accountability due to its unique position in the media landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> This is specifically BBC UK Public Services consisting of the services specified by or under Schedule 1 of [the Agreement](#).

## Meaning of 'due impartiality'

'Due' is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality. Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. 'Due' means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. So 'due impartiality' does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented. The approach to due impartiality may vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of programme and channel, the likely expectation of the audience as to content, and the extent to which the content and approach is signalled to the audience. Context, as defined in [Section two: Harm and offence](#) of the Code, is important.

Source: Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

In 2022, Ofcom wanted to build on the qualitative research conducted in the News review, with a particular focus on exploring audience attitudes towards the due impartiality of BBC services in the context of the wider news landscape. This included understanding the drivers behind these perceptions, exploring whether audience attitudes to the BBC's due impartiality have changed over the intervening period and what challenges remain. Specifically, this research examined:

- How effectively the BBC is serving all audiences in its news and current affairs provision, across its TV, radio and online platforms
- Perceptions of how well the BBC informs audiences about complex and challenging news and current affairs stories across its different platforms
- Views about due impartiality and trust in BBC news and current affairs
- Whether perceptions of due impartiality among some audience groups continue to be driven by factors other than news content, as well as the content itself

Jigsaw Research was commissioned to conduct a programme of qualitative research in 21 locations across all four nations. All participants took part in an individual pre-task prior to the fieldwork exploring their attitudes towards news reporting. In the **first stage** of fieldwork, online focus groups and interviews were conducted with a range of audiences aged 16-75, including participants representing minority groups, while the **second stage** reconvened a proportion of participants for further in-depth interviews. A range of stimulus material, including news and

current affairs excerpts and clips from across a range of media organisations, was used during the fieldwork to stimulate discussion of general perceptions of impartiality.

Most participants (except participants representing minority groups) were recruited based on varying levels of engagement with BBC news:

- **Lower BBC engagement:** using non-BBC providers of news ‘at least most days’ or ‘a few times a week’, and rarely using any BBC sources
- **Medium BBC engagement:** using any BBC source ‘a few times a week’ and using at least one other source ‘at least most days’ or ‘a few times a week’
- **Higher BBC engagement:** using at least two sources of BBC news ‘at least most days’ or ‘a few times a week’

Full details of the research approach, including a description of the different components of the research, the stimulus material, full sample structure and locations, are provided in the appendix.

## Summary of key findings

### 1. The BBC is operating in a complex and demanding news landscape

Audiences have access to news in more ways than ever before. This is especially true online, where social media enables more people to view clips or raw footage or read commentary from people who aren’t journalists. This means it is more likely that audiences will notice stories that they think are not being covered by a primary news source like the BBC.

A charged cultural climate and divided opinions, illustrated by the debates around the UK’s exit from the European Union and the merits of restrictions during a two-year pandemic, add a further layer of complexity. In this context, some favour those news outlets that take a single clear perspective on an issue and criticise some news outlets for ‘sitting on the fence’.

The news needs to engage as well as inform, meaning sometimes more neutral styles of reporting can be considered too dry or bland.

Overlapping factors contribute to what is perceived to be the provision of good quality news, including accuracy, high quality analysis and trusted reporting. All these criteria also feed into participants’ judgements about due impartiality.

## 2. Content signals are used as short cuts to judging due impartiality in the moment

Audiences define impartiality using a consistent set of attributes, such as covering all sides of the story, being fact and evidence based and not taking sides. However, despite consensus around what impartiality means in theory, this can break down when looking at news in practice.

Audience perception of what a broadcaster does or does not include as part of the news agenda (the news stories news organisations choose to lead with) is also an important aspect of their judgement of a news source's due impartiality. Criticisms of the news agenda sometimes relate to too much coverage of particular stories, but more significant is 'bias by omission'; when audiences feel a story, or a particular aspect of a story, is not being covered. Spotting this content elsewhere, including on social media, prompts demands for an established source like the BBC to cover the stories that audiences feel are important.

The concept of 'due impartiality' is not widely known but when shown the definition (see page 4 above), people recognise the importance of broadcasters using their editorial discretion to decide how to cover issues. People need to see clear examples of due impartiality in action to understand its value – topics where there is already a clear consensus are best for illustrating this.

However, beyond subjects where the balance of opinion is broadly settled as being on one side (for example, the scientific principles behind the theory of Anthropogenic Global Warming), tensions are evident in achieving due impartiality in practice, particularly around which views are included and what weight and treatment they are given. Audiences feel two key principles are at the heart of due impartiality and should be practised together:

**'Seeking alternative views and including a range of views'** is a highly valued principle of due impartiality. Being able to access a range of different opinions plays an important role in helping audiences form their own opinions. However, the inclusion of what some audiences see as extreme views in the news also prompts strong objections and can be regarded as legitimising unacceptable views.

**'Challenging different viewpoints'** is another highly valued principle of due impartiality. Audiences feel one of the most important roles the news plays is in challenging different views, including views of those in authority.

When watching news content, audience judgements about the due impartiality of a report are often based on their interpretation of presentational signals. Audiences often make these judgements quickly, intuitively and in the moment.

The signals audiences rely upon to evaluate due impartiality include ‘harder’ and ‘softer’ signals. Harder signals are more demonstrable and easier for audiences to agree upon, such as including all sides of a story or giving clear prominence to factual content. Softer signals, such as an individual’s tone of voice and demeanour, are more intuitive and judged emotionally, and subject to different interpretations. Sometimes these more subtle signals can be interpreted by audiences as potentially revealing the individual’s underlying opinion or bias.

The due impartiality of current affairs compared to news bulletins is judged differently by audiences depending on the output and platform, with investigative reports having greater freedom to take a stance and panel discussions highly valued by a range of audiences.

### **3. Wider non-programming contextual factors play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of due impartiality**

The research also highlights that perceptions of due impartiality are driven not only by the content, but also by contextual factors. These include the following:

**Relationships with news brands:** News brands are chosen by their audiences based on personal preferences and perceived fit with their own values and identity. Audiences tend to trust their preferred brands and typically see them as conveying credible and duly impartial news. A stronger sense of public ownership of the BBC, due to the TV licence fee, means that BBC audiences have higher expectations of the BBC’s due impartiality, especially in relation to BBC TV news output.

**The personal lens:** The closer audiences feel to the story, the more likely they are to have strong beliefs and emotions about it. Stories that are closer or more relevant to a person’s identity draw the strongest reactions and influence how an audience judges the due impartiality of a report or source.

**Cultural climate:** Audiences are aware of the current charged cultural climate and divided opinions and this polarisation was reflected when different audiences reached diametrically opposing conclusions when judging the due impartiality of the same news content.

**The effects of the media landscape:** Audiences now have access to many more and different sources of news and this heightens awareness that there are multiple perspectives on the news. This means it is more likely that audiences will notice stories that they think are not being covered, or not being covered enough, by a primary news source like the BBC.

**Criticism of BBC in the media:** Audiences feel the BBC receives more criticism in the media than other broadcasters, including in relation to its due impartiality.

#### 4. Audiences value BBC news and current affairs but hold them to a high standard

BBC news and current affairs is valued for high quality and professional reporting, global coverage and in-depth analysis.

Due to a sense of public ownership, BBC news is expected to be accountable and to reflect and represent the whole country. Perceived breaches of due impartiality standards lead to a greater sense of disappointment as audiences feel 'let down' by the BBC.

The BBC is criticised as 'pro-establishment' or for perceived political bias by some audiences, while others feel it comes across as inauthentic and politically ambiguous, particularly when compared to sources that are seen as having a clearer point of view.

BBC TV, radio and online news are judged differently by audiences in light of the distinct roles they play.

On due impartiality, BBC TV is judged more stringently by audiences, compared to radio and online. It is expected to satisfy a wider range of audiences and represent the whole of the UK, in contrast with other TV broadcast brands which are seen as better able to appeal to a specific audience.

Perceptions of radio news and current affairs are more driven by the relationships people have with their radio listening and habits, and therefore BBC radio audiences tend to have a more favourable view of the news on this platform. The BBC News app and website play a valued role for many audiences and are often commended for being reliably accurate and factual.

Further detail on each of these key findings is provided in the rest of this report.

## 1. The BBC is operating in a complex and demanding news landscape

The research identified several factors linked to the wider news landscape that impact perceptions of due impartiality.

### A busy news landscape exposes audiences to many more sources of news

Individuals in the research typically consumed a variety of news sources and it was rare for a person to engage with just one source, although many had preferred brands that they particularly relied on. Audiences described how they engaged with a range of different news formats and sources throughout the day and evening, as well as over the course of the week.

This consumption of a variety of sources could be observed across the different age groups but there were some nuances between the generations. Whilst older groups did engage with a range of news sources online and on social media, their repertoires tended to be mostly made up of established news sources such as broadcast brands or newspaper brands. In addition, they demonstrated a greater tendency to engage with TV news compared to younger groups.

*“I do like the news a lot, I would get it from a phone, radio, TV, even newspapers, it’s important to see what is going on in the world, it’s not just locally, it’s internationally... I start the day at 6 with the Today programme on Radio 4. I go to Fox and CNN in the US and see what’s happening there, and watch evening news”* (Man, 60+, Ballymena, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*“You grow up in a time when there are three channels and two are BBC and both have news, and it then progresses into a world where there are 97 channels and they all have news”* (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

Consumption amongst younger groups was characterised by more online engagement and lower levels of engagement with TV news. In addition, online sources used by younger audiences also tended to be relatively varied compared to older groups and they were less likely to use established news sources.

Exposure to multiple sources was particularly evident online and through social media and this encompassed recognisable news sources and other non-news content, such as raw footage and social commentary, as well as forms of ‘citizen journalism’. The effect of this varied exposure across all the different age groups was to heighten awareness of multiple perspectives on a given news story or topic.

*"I am brand loyal to a few news providers rather than just one. I tend to flick between different news sources. I wouldn't rely on just one" (Man, 25-34, York, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*"It's been eyewitness videos and you see things that I find really caught my mind, it was basically four soldiers terrorising this young child.... It was horrible to watch, but it has been shared on my Instagram, and it also caused a lot of people to be more engaged about the topic" (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"I followed this travel blogger on YouTube who travels off the beaten path to controversial places. It's almost like you can call it a modern type of journalism where they kind of go around informally with their GoPros and interview people about certain current affairs topics. It's a very powerful and effective way of doing it" (Woman, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

### A charged cultural climate adds further complexity

In recent years the cultural climate of the UK has become more politically polarised and emotionally charged, with opposing stances often being closely tied to group-based identities and personal values, as revealed by events such as the EU referendum and Scottish independence referendum. This context could make the news confusing at times when the opinions being reported seemed to differ from participants' own views, or between different sources. This prompted some to favour those news outlets that were taking a single clear perspective on an issue and criticise other news outlets for 'sitting on the fence', wanting the news to 'pick a side' and be less ambiguous in its coverage.

*"I think it's good to hear all sides of the story, but again it can be quite confusing when they are covering all the different sides, and everyone has a different point of view...some people just want to know the truth and trying to figure that out on your own can be confusing" (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

*"Impartiality means you stay on the fence and whenever anyone sits on the fence, it's not going to be regarded as anything worth listening to because as an individual, and as a human being, what you find engaging is our polar opposites because it is what you either believe or what other people believe that is important" (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"I hear different things that are put out through different sources, and sometimes I feel like I would prefer to trust someone I know and their opinion as they actually do know,*

*rather than the news sometimes where you don't know what you can believe, and you have to take it with a pinch of salt" (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

### The need for engaging news reporting can be in tension with some neutral styles

Audiences need to be engaged intellectually and emotionally by the news, as well as informed. Intellectually, the news plays an important role in helping people understand complex subjects, why events are happening and their implications. In this way the news plays a valued role in helping people form their opinions.

At a deeper level, news also engages audiences emotionally in the significance of events, including the impact of the news on people's lives.

This need to be personally engaged by the news was at times in tension with some more neutral styles of reporting. In these instances, some audiences felt a report was too dry, or that a neutral tone was coming across as bland and unengaging.

While some audiences demanded that duly impartial news should just 'stick to the facts', the reality of this sometimes fell short of engaging audiences in the news.

*"Sometimes it's not enough when it is just the facts. Here are all the facts and you can interpret it all you want, given the information and left to it really" (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*"I find them [the BBC] a bit boring, with others there is more interaction and oomph in it. You need something that grabs your attention, not something that drones on" (Woman, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

*"I think it [the BBC] is fairly impartial, but at the same time it's not particularly engaging. It's just information that you've been given that isn't particularly interesting, and I actually found content that an individual has created, a thought leader in a particular area, although it has been less impartial, it's been more engaging, and so I find it more interesting and helpful" (Man, 24-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"I agree that I can listen to the BBC more than anything else for objective news, but I prefer to listen to opinions and debate more, it's more engaging. My favourite news channel is between LBC and Talk Radio, mainly because I like listening to other people's opinions" (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“I used to watch it [the BBC] growing up but now it’s just boring, twenty minutes on same thing and they will drag it out, it’s very safe, there is not a real argument...there is no strong opinion there” (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

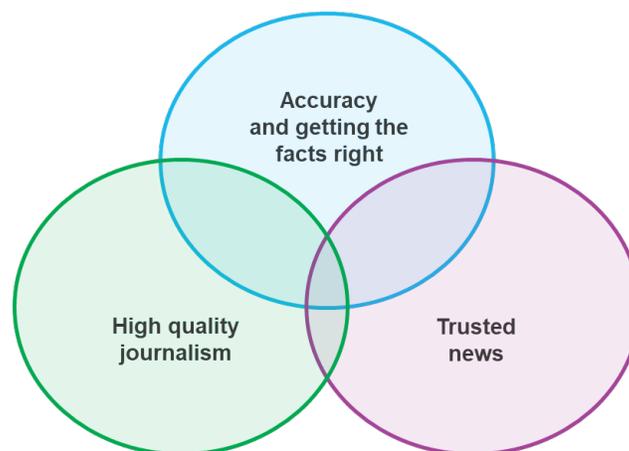
[Reacting to a non-BBC broadcast report covering the results of the North Shropshire by-election]

*“There was more detail in the report, facts and figures and going back to previous statistics which was quite good, but I found the tone of the reporter...and the way he came across as quite dull” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

### Overlapping factors play a role in audience judgements about due impartiality

Audiences indicated that there are several overlapping factors which were used to judge ‘good quality’ in news reporting. These include:

- Accuracy and getting the facts right
- High quality analysis and journalism, including investigative journalism and sensitive treatment of the story
- Trusted news that gave the audience answers and certainty.



*“They’ve [broadcasters in general] got to get their facts right, and it has got to be presented in a professional and balanced way, without any political slant” (Man, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, lower BBC engagement)*

*“It feels more intellectual, and I'm being given the chance to make my own opinions and they [Channel 4] are really helping me understand something important” (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“It's nice to see empathy shown. It's nice to see. It brings the story to life if you have someone empathetic whilst reporting” (Man, 60+, Ballymena, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“You want the truth, and you don't want a load of rubbish, they [Sky] are telling you the truth that's what you want” (Woman, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

All three quality factors contributed to an audience's judgment about the due impartiality of a news report or source. Lapses in any one of these sometimes negatively impact perceptions and 'poor journalism' and 'mistakes' could at times be construed as a breach of due impartiality by the audience. Conversely, when a news report delivered on these quality criteria, such as accuracy, it was also more likely to be seen as duly impartial.

*“They [Sky] said some things... that were not actually true or correct information, so sometimes they are trying to push their own agenda” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

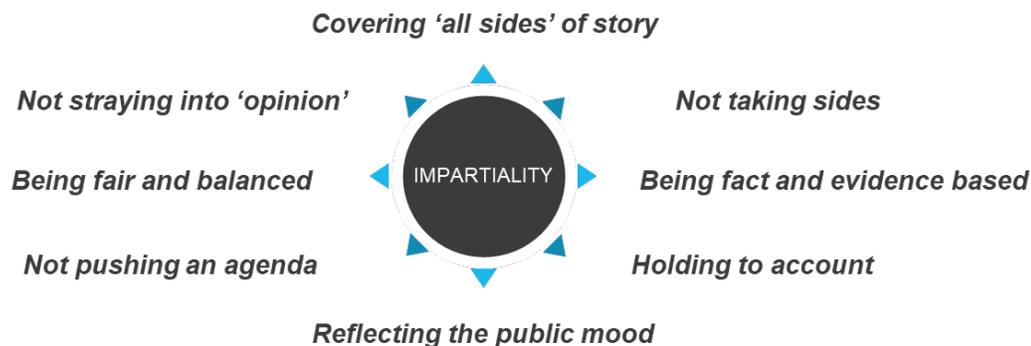
*“Impartial, so it starts with the facts and the presenters, to get it right and after that you can have an array of stuff that helps you make your mind up” (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

## 2. Content signals are used as short cuts to judging due impartiality in the moment

The research identified how content-related factors also shaped audiences' perceptions of the impartiality of news reports and news sources and the frameworks they used to judge different reports and coverage.

### Audiences demonstrate a consistent instinctive definition of impartiality

When asked initially to define what impartial news reporting meant to them prior to being given the formal definition of 'due impartiality', audiences described a consistent set of attributes.



*"All the story, no line, and no bias and no agenda to serve a political party, or a social party. It is done without any agenda"* (Woman, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"Giving the whole truth about it and not having biases one way or the other. You are not leaning one way or the other, you are reporting the facts of it"* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"No taking sides and good judgement of the whole picture. Gives you the whole picture and both sides to the story"* (Woman, 30-55, Oldham, Muslim group)

*"Impartiality for me is being accurate and not making different news for different people"* (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)

*“I would say that it is a matter of not trying to push an agenda for whatever reason, that agenda might be being pushed, whether it's to make money or to persuade people to vote in a particular way” (Man, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

But despite some consensus around what impartiality meant in theory, this often broke down when looking at specific news reports in practice. This was most graphically illustrated by audiences sometimes reacting to the same news reports and content in divergent ways.

### Perceptions of the ‘news agenda’ are important in audiences’ judgment of due impartiality

For many audiences, the news agenda (the news stories news organisations choose to lead with) was an important aspect of due impartiality. Audiences were most concerned when they felt an issue or story was not being covered, or not being covered sufficiently, in the news and sometimes this created a perception of ‘bias by omission’. These perceptions were often driven by the availability of news across many sources. Finding coverage of the story elsewhere, online or on social media, but also on other broadcast brands, led them to question why stories they saw elsewhere were not covered by sources like the BBC and they were challenging them to catch up.

The BBC was criticised for not covering stories even though other mainstream news sources may also have chosen not to include the story in their news output. The BBC’s prominence and a sense of public ownership due to the licence fee meant audiences were more likely to notice and be critical when the BBC did not pick up a story.

*“I don’t trust the BBC; they are as flawed as anyone else. When I looked at Al Jazeera there were bombs being dropped, no mention of this from the BBC. I don’t hear it on the BBC” (Man, 60+ Ballymena, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“In Texas at the moment, there is a law going through that if you provide trans healthcare, or if you affirm a child’s gender as transgender, you’re committing child abuse. The BBC didn’t cover that...I had to find out from social media” (Trans woman, 25-55, London)*

*“I do remember when evictions were happening in Palestine. I think a lot of people were kicking off with the Asian Network, and Asian Network reporters, saying, ‘Why are you not reporting this? Why are you not discussing these topics?’ I think they even shared a comment like ‘We’re not allowed to under our policy. We have to be impartial’... I think they should still be sharing content and raising awareness on these issues that are happening” (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

In the same way they criticised the omission of stories, audiences also criticised coverage where they felt important aspects of a story were left out, or where they felt important points were not put forward effectively.

[Reacting to a BBC broadcast report about migrants crossing the English Channel]

*“The immigration was about France, and he started talking about different parts of the world and the question was about the English Channel, and he didn’t challenge him, he started talking about the rest of the world and talked about Libya or whatever, and he didn’t bring him back to talking about more local to home, that is where the frontline is, and that’s where the news should be talking about”* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

[Reacting to a range of different reports covering teen knife crime]

*The BBC was decent you had different accounts included, a range of information including a local person whereas the other one [non-BBC broadcaster] he was just focusing on Black males whereas the BBC news interviewed different people, the police officer a local resident and varied opinions not just having one person’s opinion* (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)

This perception of stories being omitted or not being covered in full led some to speculate that omissions were deliberate and a form of ‘censorship’. They interpreted the omission of stories or what they perceived as key aspects of them as hiding the truth, which damaged their trust in the news source concerned. Such speculation was further fuelled if audiences interpreted perceived omissions as following a similar pattern in the source’s previous reporting.

*“Well, I should say at times I trust it [the BBC], but I’ve noticed that Covid has gone completely out of the picture. It seems like they have completely shut off the pandemic which makes you think how bad things really were if they completely stop covering that?”* (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*“If someone has a view that they don’t want to show you can tell because they then cut off the person before they can make their point. You know like with the Covid vaccine. Anything with an alternate view was cut off. Sky News will not do that”* (Man, 25-34, Swansea, core group, medium BBC engagement)

## Audiences need examples of due impartiality in action to understand its value

Mid-way through the discussions with participants, and following their consideration of what “impartiality” meant to them, a summarised definition of “due impartiality”, adapted from Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code (see page 4), and supporting editorial techniques, were shared and they were invited to give their further reactions.<sup>2</sup> A summary of the stimulus used is contained in the appendix.

### **Due impartiality (shortened definition used in the research stimulus)**

Not favouring one side or another, but it does not mean that news and current affairs providers must give an equal amount of time to every view. Instead, news and current affairs providers are meant to be unbiased trusted sources of news in how they present different viewpoints – challenging, probing, testing alternatives as appropriate as well as providing context to help inform viewers. This approach applies to news and can apply to most current affairs as well.

Few had heard of due impartiality and the definition prompted audiences to ask ‘who decides’ what is appropriate, which in turn underlined the importance of trusting editorial decisions made by news sources.

*“The point is raised about extreme views and contentious views; you don’t want to put them in the face of the public because some of them are horrific. But this is where the ‘as appropriate’ comes in. This is where the controversy and extreme [views are] weeded out, and there has to be some appropriateness, and someone has to choose, but again who chooses?”* (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

The definition sometimes raised questions around the weight given to different opinions. As a principle, the idea of unequal treatment was questioned by some participants and felt at odds with their instinctive definitions of impartiality (see page 14), which emphasised not taking sides and being balanced in news reporting.

*“I think it’s a double-edged sword. Generally, it is a good aim, but I imagine it isn’t always possible. I think people should be given an equal amount of time. I guess it depends on*

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<sup>2</sup> A summarised definition was used to make it easier for participants to understand.

*the person or the context” (Man, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“To me that reads like they won’t give everyone the same amount of time to discuss it. They maybe will do little snippets, mention it, and then carry on to another point of view. So to me it sounds like they don’t want to give the same amount of time to every viewpoint, which I feel is wrong. I question that particular part” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

Participants often needed clear examples of due impartiality in action to understand its value – topics where there is already a clear consensus are best for illustrating this (for example, the scientific principles behind the theory of Anthropogenic Global Warming). However, the spontaneous examples that did come to mind for participants were Holocaust denial, racist views, climate change denial and misinformation about Covid-19, where it was recognised that not all viewpoints should be given equal weight. Participants therefore tended to highlight views that were seen as either morally abhorrent or factually incorrect.

*“To me due impartiality means not balancing something that is clearly evident with something which is clearly ridiculous just for the sake of balance. So, for example, climate change denial...” (Woman, Aberystwyth, 60+, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“To go to an extreme, I don’t agree with the others, because to give equal amount of time to every view, if for example it’s on The Holocaust, you don’t give an equal amount of time to Holocaust deniers and Nazi sympathisers. So, you wouldn’t want to necessarily give time to an extreme view that is controversial and potentially inflammatory” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“A lot of opinions on Covid-19 are speculations, so the little info we do get from trusted sources, we have to trust the majority of that, it has to be taken as transparent. If they listed all the speculations, it doesn’t need to be reported as on an equal level as all the factual information” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

During the latter stages of fieldwork, the war in Ukraine helped to bring the idea of due impartiality alive for audiences.<sup>3</sup> Participants valued BBC and other broadcasters’ coverage of

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<sup>3</sup> Russia invaded Ukraine on Thursday 24 February 2022, as the second stage of the fieldwork for this research commenced.

the Russian Government’s motives and the context of the invasion but also understood why they were not giving the Russian Government’s point of view equivalence or equal treatment.<sup>4</sup>

*“The [war in] Ukraine has been done well by the BBC, it has been weighted to the side of Ukraine, helping to show that Ukraine wasn’t chosen at random [and the] historical context” (Woman, 30-55, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*“With regards the war going on right now they are taking on both sides, but at the same time I feel they are being slightly partial to Ukraine... and in my opinion rightly so. It would be difficult to remain professional as a journalist right now and cover both sides of the story” (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

### Audiences value seeking alternative views and including a range of views

As already highlighted, audiences recognised that with some topics, certain views do not merit equal treatment.

However, more generally, seeking alternative views and including a range of views was one of the most valued principles of due impartiality. Participants felt that coverage of a given story or issue in an individual report required different views to be included to be impartial. Hearing a range of viewpoints was important in helping them to form their own opinions about a particular issue or topic, especially for more complex subjects. This included hearing and seeing disagreement on issues explored in news stories.

*“You need the alternative viewpoints to gauge your own viewpoints” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“Being impartial means, you have to listen to other people’s points of view as well” (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

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<sup>4</sup> Under the Broadcasting Code, when dealing with “matters of major political or industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy” such as the Ukraine conflict, broadcasters have to include an appropriately wide range of significant views (and give those views due weight) in each programme or in clearly linked and timely programmes. How broadcasters comply with this requirement is an editorial decision for them as long as they comply with the Broadcasting Code.

[Reacting to BBC coverage of the acquittal of four people accused of criminal damage in connection with the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol]

*“There’s still a significant amount of people that disagree with this. If it was just like 1%, I didn’t need to hear them. But it’s way more than that and therefore we need to hear them. I think there needs to be a line. Where it’s literally just two people disagreeing with this, we don’t need to hear them, for example. But if it’s a significant amount of people that are disagreeing with this, we should. We should still hear them because nobody is going to be unified”* (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)

### Including extreme views sometimes prompted strong objections

Including what some audiences perceived as extreme views was at times strongly criticised, particularly when such views were permitted on programming with a wide audience such as the BBC’s *Question Time*. In some cases, the inclusion of such views was seen as legitimising them.

Some audiences at times felt the BBC had acted inappropriately by including extreme views that they saw as unacceptable, such as when Nick Griffin was included on a BBC *Question Time* panel in 2009.<sup>5</sup> Some participants, including some trans individuals, also felt the BBC allowed unacceptable views on air by ‘always including’ people who were against trans rights. However, others saw the inclusion of such voices as an important aspect of freedom of speech.

*“I think everyone was talking about, obviously the fact that Nick Griffin, should he be allowed to come on, and it’s freedom of speech and basically the conflict of freedom of speech against basically hate speech. The fact that they had him coming on the show was just legitimising basically a racist party”* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

*“Someone had found out from the BBC it’s official content policy, which was that if you were going to go into BBC news to talk about trans issues you have to have someone who disagreed with you and disagreed with it. So, if I went onto BBC and said that I think trans people should live and be free, I’d have to have someone else going ‘no’. But if some woman was on TV and said, ‘I think all trans people should be made to stay in one*

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<sup>5</sup> Nick Griffin, then leader of the British National Party, appeared as a panellist on *Question Time*, a BBC political panel show, on 22 October 2009.

*box or room and never see the sunlight', there is no obligation to have an opposing opinion because of the idea that we are a minority group" (Trans woman, 25-55, London)*

### Challenging views is also a valued principle of due impartiality

Many participants saw news broadcasters' role as holding those in power, particularly politicians, to account. Audiences often wanted their news presenters to ask challenging questions of figures across the political spectrum and interrogate the answers with equal rigour.

*"You have to ask them those challenging questions and make them feel uncomfortable, that is the role of the journalist to challenge them. They are not there to set out their pitch" (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*"The BBC need to be a little bit more bullish, and not be so scared about the repercussions, and that goes with all points of view. I think you should give a left-wing view just as much of the hard time as you should do a right winger" (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*"They challenge quite well and put the people on their toes, whereas I think the BBC, I've never seen them challenge them that much. They do challenge, but I personally haven't felt that value that I have from ITV or Channel 4" (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"I think it is important. I think ensuring the views expressed in the news item are challenged correctly by the presenter, so then you can get an alternative view. So then he's not just going to be saying what he wants without being questioned" (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*"I like the way he [TV presenter] just keeps on delving in, and just won't be brushed off. He really gets the nitty gritty, and actually asks the questions that most people want to ask" (Woman, 35-55, London, Jewish group)*

While uncovering tensions as to whether extreme views should be included in news, the research also highlighted the importance of firmly coupling together the principles of 'seeking alternative views and including a range of views' with 'challenging views' to ensure that any more extreme views are interrogated appropriately.

## Audiences use a range of different content signals as short cuts for judging the due impartiality of a report

When looking at news content, audience judgements about the due impartiality of a report were often based on their interpretation of different signals picked up from the way the report was presented. Audiences would often make these judgements quickly, intuitively and in the moment. The signals audiences relied upon to judge impartiality were a mix of ‘harder’ and ‘softer’ signals.

### ‘Harder’ signals are easier for audiences to articulate and agree upon

Harder signals were more consciously assessed by audiences and tended to be more overt and demonstrable, and therefore easier for audiences to articulate.

Specifically, harder signals included the following:

- Clearly devoting enough time and space in the report to get across different sides of the story
- Prominence given to facts and figures to underpin reports’ objectivity
- Including a range of views and representing different perspectives
- On-the-ground reporting from where the story was happening, and including people who were part of a news story or had been eyewitnesses
- Enabling members of the public to participate, ask questions or express views
- Balanced discussion panels with a representative spread of different views

*“I like to see what they are actually talking about shown on TV, so going into schools with the Covid thing and hearing from the people directly involved with the story makes it feel more real rather than just someone telling you about it... it doesn’t feel so made up because you are actually seeing what’s happening” (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

There was general agreement about many of these harder signals across all audiences and they were broadly similar to participants’ own instinctive ways of describing impartiality. Reports that met these criteria were often perceived to be impartial.

[Reacting to a BBC news TV report covering teen knife crime]

*“The BBC was the best in terms of general coverage, the different interviewees, local residents, the youth worker, and the police and that was quite fair. The BBC is the only objective report because it interviewed different people, the police officer, a local resident, and they varied the opinions, not just one opinion. It had the stats, and it would*

*have been good to have even more opinions within the report... but the BBC had a wide range of perspectives so you could figure out your own perspective from the information they gave you” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

[Reacting to a BBC news *Outside Source* report covering comedy and ‘cancel culture’].

*“It felt very similar to BBC reports, it was a very balanced report, and they sought lots of different views. They got different opinions in there, it was a longer story, but there wasn’t padding in there, it was long for a reason, and they included different viewpoints that added to the story. It wasn’t just fluff and the reporter just telling you what they think” (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“I did find that the BBC did get more in there. They had [comedian] and other comedians, and also the general public, so there was quite a bit of impartiality, and you could make your own mind up, everyone could make their own mind up on that” (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

[Reacting to BBC *Newsnight* covering the Government’s consultation on legislation to ban conversion therapy]

*“I did think it presented the issue well. It said ‘this is the problem, this is what people want, this is why people want this gone, that’s why some people might not want it gone’, and I think he did that very, very well. I think there was a diversity of opinion. I think it was a really, really good example of impartiality. It feels quite atypical. They didn’t have anyone on there talking about how it was some kind of a frontal attack on women and girls, which is the BBC’s normal line. You know, there wasn’t any kind of attempt to rely on very sensationalist lines. Often when BBC report trans stuff, it’s immediately ‘look at this transsexual five-year-old’ or ‘people are going to steal your children’” (Trans man, 25-55, London)*

### A consistent set of ‘softer’ signals are also used to judge impartiality of news content

Softer signals were more intuitively sensed and emotionally judged by audiences, rather than overtly observed, and were therefore more subtle and subject to different audience interpretations. Consequently, softer signals were at times construed as revealing an underlying opinion or bias in the way a news report was presented, even if this was not directly articulated in that report.

Specifically softer signals included the following:

- Tone of voice – audiences demonstrated a tonal sensitivity to the way a reporter or presenter presented a story, sometimes interpreting tone as revealing a personal opinion
- Choice of language – the words reporters chose to describe events and their impact were interpreted in different ways
- Handling of interviews – audiences valued the news presenter asking challenging questions but, in some instances, also saw challenging as ‘interrupting’ and potentially imposing the presenter’s own views, particularly where they felt the interviewee was not given sufficient time to answer
- Demeanour of presenter or reporter – sometimes audiences felt the body language and demeanour of the presenter or reporter revealed a bias
- Soft skills and balance of discussion panel moderator – audiences also judged whether a moderator of a discussion panel was even-handed in challenging different sides and managing the debate

In this way a reporter’s or presenter’s tone of voice, choice of language and even facial expressions were sometimes seen as conveying an appropriate and engaging description of events for one audience, whilst another audience would interpret these signals as revealing their underlying personal opinion about the story they were reporting.

[Reacting to BBC reporter’s coverage of the North Shropshire by-election]

*“There is a lot of emphasis on negative words. She was pausing and emphasising on the negative words and the bad words, punching them through in her sentences, and punctuated by the emphasis to try and make people pick up on that, and put the drama in the delivery... The reporter was trying to sensationalise and use buzz words. The language used was quite inflammatory, “pounded”, “fierce”, and definite delivery to emphasise. And “speculation that he [the Prime Minister] is on notice”, speculation by who? Speculation doesn’t hold any sway in news, what is speculation? The words were deliberately chosen.”* (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

[Reacting to a non-BBC broadcast report covering racism in sport]

*“I think in addition to that, I think the tone that was used had an impact. The facial expressions also had an impact on the way the story was reported. The language used was very different”* (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)

[Reacting to a non-BBC broadcast report on migrants crossing the English Channel]

*"I don't think it was impartial at all, it was just an argument, and the host was shouting over him and didn't agree with what he said, so it was just an argument, and nothing was resolved or moving forward with anything, and the presenter was poor. I think he was very unprofessional. He was very rude"* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

[Another participant in the same group reacting to the same report]

*"I don't think he was rude. He was doing his job properly and if you want impartiality then you want a balanced viewpoint, and he was engaging the guy and challenging his viewpoint, and I would hope that he would do the same if it was the other way round. So, it's challenging the other viewpoint as well"* (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

[Reacting to a BBC report covering an escape from an Israeli prison by six Palestinian men]

*"I agree that he was stating the facts and being very careful. I think over time journalists have become like that. They are very careful when reporting these issues so that they're not biased, and they are impartial. But at the same time, I just feel as though there were small kind of indications. So, if you pay very close attention, then you do feel you get the impression that what he's trying to say is... "here's the bad guys, here's the good guys", that kind of kind of impression"* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

### Audiences judged the impartiality of current affairs differently

Current affairs output was judged by different standards depending upon the type of output and was a more complex category for some audiences to evaluate compared with news bulletins. Audiences generally assumed that different criteria would apply to investigative reports versus discussion panels such as *Question Time*.

Investigative reports were seen as having permission to take a stance and have more of a single-minded narrative. However, this permission was always based on the assumption of a rigorous investigation and evidence-based findings.

*"I wouldn't say Panorama is necessarily impartial because it's more investigative and I don't think it's really their job to be as impartial as the news"* (Man, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, core group, lower BBC engagement)

Long-form discursive news programmes such as *Newsnight* were generally expected to adhere to standards of duly impartial reporting that were more akin to a news bulletin format.

Panel discussions were highly valued across a broad range of audiences. The balance and representativeness of the panel and the even-handedness of the moderation were key to judging whether a panel discussion was duly impartial. Panel discussions broadcast on TV tended to be more strictly judged than when on the radio.

Radio as a platform was less strictly judged and had greater permission from audiences to be more provocative and sometimes even controversial in approach. Some audiences chose to listen to radio for its lively debates, including between very different points of view, which were sometimes reflected in the range of presenters a radio station offered. In addition, they felt involving the public in such debates provided authenticity through unscripted responses and some participants valued having controversy and ‘outspoken’ views in the context of a lively discussion.

However, audiences still expected overall balance in the range of views that should be included. Some brands such as LBC were highly commended for their wide range of different presenters that reflected very different points of view, including ones that participants disagreed with, and were able to avoid if they preferred.

*“[With LBC presenters] you sort of know where they're coming from. I do like it when they kind of poke the bear and have a provocative way of reporting it. I like the fact that they do like to get a reaction. But then you get people phoning in with both sides of opinions, and I quite like hearing that balanced view, rather than someone just telling me this is what's happening” (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)*

*“My favourite news channel is between LBC and Talk Radio, mainly because I like listening to other people's opinions and I like a debate as well” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“He [radio presenter] is an MP and he is on the radio and he exists in a certain space and you can listen to him and another presenter with a different opinion and have your own opinion based on both of them” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“I listen on the radio and they will bring in members of the public who will express their views like us today. It's live, they are given a question straight away, and they say how they feel and it's straight from the heart, and it's not necessarily politically correct because they don't think they will get the sack if they say that” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“The fact that there is a balance there and it's very opposite, you couldn't get two more different people, it's a completely different view and I think that's good. I think it's healthy,*

*it gives an even balance, and it gives you a strong set of information to go for whatever sort of political decision you have in the future. You can mould it yourself, you are not being moulded. You can decide for yourself what the view you want. And there is controversy as well. The controversial, you know they are outspoken, and I think that's good. It's nice someone's put the cat among the pigeons, isn't it?" (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

As in Ofcom's research in 2019, panel discussion programmes like *Question Time* appeared to be relatively influential in shaping perceptions of the BBC's due impartiality as the programme was frequently mentioned across the research. Relatively high levels of audience participation meant the programme has a strong democratic feel which translated to positive perceptions of its due impartiality.

Views about *Question Time* also highlighted some of the key tensions surrounding due impartiality, in particular:

- Ensuring an appropriately range of different views was represented on the panel
- Deciding which points of view were 'appropriate' to include

Some participants criticised the programme's panel, as they felt it was often skewed in certain directions and not representative of a balanced range of views. In addition, as highlighted previously, for some audiences the BBC had acted inappropriately when it had included views that were considered as extreme or unacceptable by some participants.

Part of the objection to inviting extreme opinions onto programmes also stemmed from the perception that those opinions were not always appropriately challenged by having an opposing view represented on the panel. This underlines the importance of ensuring the principles of 'seeking alternative views' and 'challenging views' are practised together if all audiences are to have confidence in a broadcaster's approach to due impartiality. There are a range of editorial techniques that can be used to preserve due impartiality in current affairs discussion programmes such as *Question Time*, beyond panellists simply putting forward their views. For example, alternative views can be expressed by members of the audience and the programme presenter challenging the various panellists. However, the challenge with current affairs discussion programmes such as *Question Time* was that they were seen to rely on the other panellists being as successful at communicating their points of view as those who held the views which some participants objected to.

*"I stopped watching Question Time four years ago or so because the panel was never equally balanced. The period around Brexit there was a massive amount of people like*

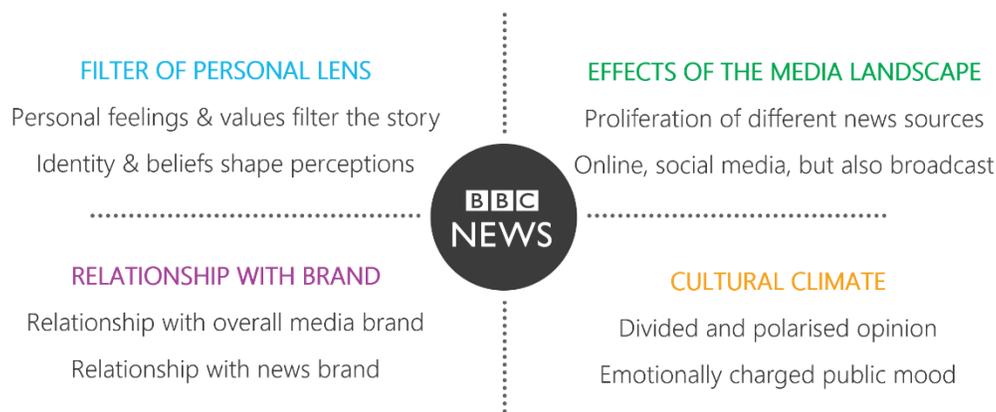
*Nigel Farage being on without necessarily an equal opposition” (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

*“I get angry and it’s not good to watch but the only problem with Question Time is the balance of the panel, and you get similar opinions, and you need more people from different opinions and perspectives” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

### 3. Wider non-programming contextual factors play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of due impartiality

When participants were shown news content, their perception of the content’s due impartiality was not only driven by the content itself. A wider range of contextual factors played a pivotal role in shaping audience judgements about the due impartiality of news reports and source.

#### Contextual factors influencing perceptions



Analysis of these contextual factors helped participants to understand the challenges of satisfying all audiences in terms of the due impartiality of a report or news source.

#### The personal lens

The personal lens played an influential role in shaping reactions to the way a news story was reported: the closer the audience felt to the story, the more likely they were to have strong beliefs and emotions about it. These beliefs and feelings in turn shaped how they judged the due impartiality of the report.

#### Stories that resonate more closely with a person’s identity elicit the strongest reactions

The influence of the personal lens was at its most intense when the news touched upon issues relating to personal identity. This encompassed different sources of identity such as sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity and faith, but also other aspects of identity such as political affiliations.

*“Everyone has their own identity and background into why they have the views they do”  
(16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

News reports prompted a range of different emotions, including being recognised and supported, ignored and marginalised, or misunderstood and misrepresented, and even sometimes a sense of personal threat.

[Two different participants reacting to a non-BBC radio discussion about the Government's consultation on legislation to ban conversion therapy]<sup>6</sup>

*“I'm trying hard to pull myself away emotionally, completely. It felt it was actually quite reasonable that people do hold that opinion, and they have every right to hold that opinion, but yeah, I'm trying. I'm trying to kind of pull myself away from it, but I'm finding it very difficult to do. So, on that particular issue, it just felt very much like a conversation with my father” (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

*“Unfortunately, I can't be impartial on something that is regulated torture, especially when I actually know people of the sort of generation before me who would have gone through that from the sixties onwards. So, when you have a personal experience or a personal connection to the news story, you know that your view of it's always going to be tainted” (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

[Reacting to a report about teen knife crime from a non-BBC broadcaster where the presenter was interviewing a guest about the causes and nature of teenage knife crime]

*“It's very tough even for a Black person to hear that. It's not just the case that it's about Black people, and you can't have a White person say that. Even for a Black person to say it, it can also be scrutinised for being a token person. It's not true, and they should have had more interviewees, and then they could have a debate, and come to a compromise” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

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<sup>6</sup> Conversion therapy is the term for therapy that seeks to change or suppress someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. (British Psychological Society)

[Reacting to reports about racism in sport]

*“In my opinion everything was factual and true but what were they trying to get at? They focused a lot on him sharing racist slurs in the past, but they didn’t focus on the racism in the sport, and that affects a lot of people, and they should have focused on stopping racism in the sport, and not just on the things that he did and his accountability. Just a bit on the wider racism would have made it more impartial”* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

*“I believe it's an issue that it would be very difficult for a Caucasian female to relate to. So, the fact that we have two Caucasian females presenting this story, it's not going to give as much weight to the story. I don't even think they'll be able to sympathise with what he's gone through and the issues that led up to this story. So, I think that in itself is a big problem”* (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)

Personal stances around political issues, or feelings about different political parties, were also influential in shaping audience perceptions of due impartiality.<sup>7</sup> Where people held a certain view on a policy, politician or politically controversial event, this impacted upon their interpretation of reports on those issues.

[A Leave voter with conservative views reacting to general coverage of ‘Number 10 Christmas Party’ story in the wider media – the research was conducted around the time when the Metropolitan Police announced they would conduct an investigation]

*“Partygate: I am sick of it, but it is what people are interested in. But you can’t report it factually; even the investigation won’t be impartial, the report will just be what they want us to see anyway”* (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

[A Labour supporter recalling BBC coverage of Jeremy Corbyn during the 2019 General Election]

*“When there were a lot of things in the press about Corbyn, I got very much turned off simply because of some of the witch hunt that appeared”* (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

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<sup>7</sup> The sample criteria included recruiting participants according to political leanings based upon past voting behaviour, for example the EU referendum and Scottish independence referendum where relevant. Further details can be found in the appendix.

[A left leaning Remain voter recalling coverage of migrants crossing the English Channel in 2022]

*“Three people died and they call the people ‘they were immigrants’, and in itself by using that term it dehumanises the people that were on those boats, because they’re always using those certain words, instead of actual people, just like your next-door neighbour that you know” (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)*

### For some audiences, international stories feel very relevant

While they could be a source of general concern and anxiety, as illustrated by the unfolding situation in Ukraine in the build up to and aftermath of Russia’s invasion, audiences were generally less likely to have strong opinions and beliefs about an international story. In an international context, audiences were more reliant on the authority of the news source, tended to defer to their expertise and trusted their due impartiality accordingly.

However, for some audiences international stories felt intensely personal, for example, if reporting on a country or region that was strongly associated with their own background. This was illustrated by the different reactions of Muslim and Jewish audiences to coverage of the Middle East and Israel/Palestine in particular.

*“I have family in Israel, in the army in Israel, and we get to see or hear the other side of the story. That’s what gets my goat, because... we know what’s happening. We know how the press works. We know what the world thinks of Israel’s actions”. (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)*

*“I’ve always followed the occupation of Palestine... I’ll find stories from newspapers in Palestine, in the Palestinian territories, following stories that are basically these Instagram pages that are releasing stories from their direct reporters” (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

## Relationship with news brands

### Relationships with news brands shape perceptions of due impartiality

Audiences tended to believe and trust their preferred brands and sources of news that they had chosen to engage with. News brands were chosen by their audiences based on personal preferences and perceived fit with the audiences' values and identity and audiences tended to trust their preferred news brands to provide duly impartial reporting and coverage.

Audiences often demonstrated a strong affinity and close relationship with their chosen radio brands. Radio news and current affairs were often valued for their culture of longer in-depth conversations or interviews. As sources of news, they tended to be seen as spaces for different opinions and provocative debate, including disagreement. An additional source of value was the opportunity for the public to participate and express their views. These attributes were seen as demonstrating the principles of due impartiality in terms of seeking and including a range of viewpoints, and challenging different viewpoints.

*"I also listen to LBC and with [LBC presenter] you know what you will get with him. He will express an opinion and it might not be an opinion you like, but you know what you are getting with him, and if he is giving his opinion then he will invite members of the public to give their views"* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"I listen to talkRadio a lot and they sit down for two or three-hour conversations...and they have frank and honest conversations about all sorts of things like climate change and all sorts"* (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)

*"I've basically grown up with the BBC radio news on for the majority of my life. It's an alarm clock, starting with Radio 4, for most of my life. So that's my main onboarding for the day to see what's going on"* (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)

Newspaper brands (including their online platforms) were another strong example of this, where brands were either chosen or rejected based on their perceived values and outlook.

*"The Guardian is the main one. Because it's the most in line with my values. I think it's important to me. I want to be able to read it and kind of go, 'yeah, that's fine'. I feel reading the Guardian, there are things I disagree on, but when I read something else, another newspaper, you just don't believe it"* (Trans woman, 25-55, London)

*“I like the wide variety of news found on the Daily Mail, and also the variety of opinions. They also balance hard hitting stories with more light-hearted stories that focus on beauty, fashion and entertainment” (Woman, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

The loyalty felt by regular viewers of particular TV news brands was driven by a range of factors. For example, viewers of *Channel 4 News* typically valued it for what they saw as its deeper investigative reporting, being prepared to cover stories not covered elsewhere (partly enabled by a longer programme) and presenters who were seen as not afraid to challenge. Some Sky News viewers described how its matter of fact and business-like delivery conveyed a neutrality that felt truthful to them, while some ITV viewers valued what they saw as its lighter more relatable style.

Viewers of these different brands sometimes contrasted their preferred TV news with BBC TV news, which some felt was more formal, staid and less willing to challenge compared to their preferred brand.

*“Channel 4 don’t dumb down the news, they have stories that others don’t. It covers a lot more than BBC do in their hour, and I find their questioning and reporters tend to challenge more than BBC news as well” (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“ITV are a more relaxed way of doing the news, and it’s all done in jest. When it’s the BBC there is no chemistry with the reporters, and ITV’s way of doing it makes you want to watch it more” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“I think Channel 4 as a channel sells itself as a brand that they are very much like the new kids on the block, and very much engaging my generation. So, I just go to them more than I would the BBC. I just trust the brand a bit more compared to the BBC, which I feel is very much like the old guard. It’s just an old way of doing certain things, in certain ways” (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*“I’d much rather watch Sky news than BBC. It’s the way it’s presented. It’s just the BBC hasn’t moved with the times. It’s kind of stagnant. I just prefer the way they present or give over a story; you know, that’s important to me” (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)*

When audiences gravitate to a news outlet’s particular style or trust its coverage, there can be a halo effect that positively influences their views of the outlet’s other attributes, including making them more likely to consider that outlet impartial.

## The audience relationship with the BBC brand includes a sense of public ownership

Across different audience groups, participants' relationship with the BBC was different than their relationships with other broadcast brands. There was a stronger sense of public ownership that was even apparent amongst audiences with lower BBC engagement. Many participants had grown up with the BBC, recognising it to have played a role in their lives from childhood onwards. This heritage gave the BBC a unique position in the news repertoire of some audiences.

*"It is our legacy which you have grown up with, we have all grown up with it, it, you are pre-programmed to watch it"* (Man, 35-44, Birmingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"Growing up, the [BBC] six o'clock news, you know, it was always the [BBC] six o'clock news, I would always watch it. And as a child when I was growing up, we were pretty much loyal to the BBC, but now I often switch between BBC and Channel 4. I tend to still look at BBC on the website rather than the actual news channel"* (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"What I really like about the BBC is that it is owned by us. It is not owned by someone who has got a particular ideology or is earning money through advertising and having to appease advertisers"* (Woman, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)

Occasionally participants referenced events that damaged the reputation of the BBC and eroded their trust in the institution. This erosion of trust was caused by the incidents and their perceptions of how the BBC dealt with them.

*"Ages ago there was a story about the Martin Bashir incident where basically, there were creative, fraudulent bank statements that were used with Diana, and then basically it took so long for this investigation [of Bashir's activity] to go through. And nothing happened to Martin Bashir"* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

*"I think maybe it's the institution itself that has become too elitist and too establishmentarian in the way that they approach certain scandals within the BBC like Jimmy Savile and sexual harassment. And it gives me less trust in them as a whole"* (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)

## Cultural climate

### A charged cultural climate shapes perceptions of due impartiality

As already highlighted, the cultural climate in recent years has become more politically polarised and emotionally charged, with opposing stances often being closely tied to group-based identities and personal values. In the research it was also evident that current divided opinions, illustrated by the debates around the UK's exit from the European Union and the merits of restrictions during a two-year pandemic, pose challenges in delivering a duly impartial news service that satisfies all audiences. A charged cultural climate was reflected in participants' comments on many issues, whether observed when watching programmes like *Question Time* or coming through the tenor of wider reporting around stories that were strongly associated with feelings of public anger.

*"I actually think that people get very angry sometimes. I used to watch Question Time, but I get nothing now. It's just people arguing"* (Man, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*"I think there's a lot of anger. But there's almost a sense [of]... when is this going to end?"* (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)

In addition, some participants acknowledged the challenges of being duly impartial when people have made up their own minds on issues and expressed concerns about whether recent political trends and the politicisation of debates on key issues had begun to erode the credibility of news itself.

*"It's difficult to be impartial on different things because people have already made their own mind up anyway. If it's political, people have already got their own opinion and have made their own mind up anyway"* (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)

*"[Impartiality is difficult in the context of] the rising tide of populism, and that has definitely been influencing the reports that are coming through on the news. I think it's losing its factual place and moving more into a position of influence, which is an incredibly dangerous route to go down"* (Man, 25-55, London LGB group)

However, the clearest demonstration of how this context of divided opinions shaped perceptions of impartiality was when audiences reacted to the same news reports in divergent ways, based upon their personal and partisan feelings about the issues being reported.

For example, in a non-BBC broadcast report covering the deaths of 27 people crossing the English Channel in 2021, a news presenter interviewed a politician about immigration. Participants within one focus group discussion had very different reactions to how the interview was conducted. One participant, who was a regular viewer of the news brand in question, saw the interviewer as asking appropriately challenging questions:

*“I thought he was then challenging the guy and asking questions and countering the view by challenging the politician and coming back to him with facts. And the reporter was saying the opposite to challenge those opinions, and if it was a different opinion, he would also challenge with the opposite view...it was quality questioning”* (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

However, others felt the same interviewer was imposing their own agenda upon the interview:

*“I totally disagree...I just think he was getting rather irate, and he has his own view on it, and he wasn't listening to anything the minister was saying, there are a lot of people who come across, some are genuine asylum seekers, but a lot are economic migrants, and we don't want lots of them coming across”* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

In another example when looking at reports covering the escape from an Israeli prison by six Palestinian men, Muslim and Jewish participants had very different reactions to the wording used in the reports and when reporting this topic in general. Members of these two communities demonstrated an acute sensitivity towards the precise terminology used and highlighted instances where they felt the issues had been misrepresented.

*“I think they do band[y] around the wrong terminology...The terminology they use makes people think that Israel shouldn't be there...but Israel is its own state. The terminology used is very wrong often”* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

*“Well, I think it did try to do both sides of the story, but I just picked up a lot of small subtle things which maybe were not so impartial...it mentioned it was an Israeli police commander, but on the Palestinian side, he was a ‘militant war leader”* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

A further example that came through the research was in the context of the wider news cycle at the time of the fieldwork. The perception of coverage of the ‘Number 10 Christmas party’ story was a good example of how different audiences held divergent viewpoints as to whether a story had been covered in a duly impartial way. Some audiences felt the news in general was

covering the story too much and that it was being over-reported, potentially with an agenda behind it. Some audiences felt this sense of over-reporting was demonstrative of a lack of impartiality by the broadcasters in general. Other audiences called for the news to continue to pursue the story and hold the relevant politicians to account. They felt that not covering it sufficiently would constitute a lack of impartiality.

*“It [Number 10 Christmas party] is the lead headline everywhere. It has been covered extensively and it has been overdone now, they are digging now”* (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“Is it biased to not go with a story because it’s not impartial? Would it be biased to not publish a story about Boris Johnson at yet another party because that’s not impartial? If it’s true and it happened, then it should be reported always. They’re letting the PM get away with it”* (Woman, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)

### Despite divided opinions, at times audiences can coalesce around a significant event

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, during the later stages of the fieldwork for this research. In this context the BBC frequently became a go-to source for news and tended to be seen in its best light, including amongst some audiences who were less engaged with or were previously critical of the BBC. Despite previous reservations they may have had, several of these participants still turned to the BBC for trusted and authoritative news during times of crisis. The same was observed during the early stages of the pandemic in research on [the role of public service broadcasting](#), and the 2019 review of BBC news and current affairs; when people turned to BBC news during major events.

This suggests a degree of residual trust in BBC news during times of anxiety and emotional need, including amongst those less engaged with the BBC or more critical audiences.

*“I was watching the BBC news last night and 25 minutes was quite rightly devoted to what’s going on in Ukraine, and they have a lot of people over here, on the ground”* (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“...in the last couple of weeks, the world situation has changed dramatically, so I have actually been using the BBC more, but less out of choice and more out of, if I don’t use this, I’m not going to really find out much about what’s going on”* (Trans woman, 25-55, London)

However, an important qualification to this observation was that not all audiences were in agreement during these moments of relative unity. Some participants questioned whether the coverage of the invasion of Ukraine revealed a Eurocentric focus to the news, while ignoring equivalent violations in other regions of the world.

[Referring to UK broadcasters in general]

*“...the current news events with Ukraine, I think that's quite a clear and stark reminder of how one sided the news really is...it's just the same thing that is happening in Palestine...that's been happening for so many years, and no one really reports on it”*  
(Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

## The effects of the media landscape on perceptions of trust and editorial choice

### A plural media landscape has heightened awareness of multiple perspectives on the news

The range of different sources consumed, combined with ‘skim and scan’ consumption behaviours (for example only engaging with the story at headline level via devices such as smart phones before scrolling on), resulted in some audiences engaging at headline level only or picking out fragments of stories that could be taken out of context. This was particularly prevalent online and through social media, where reactions to stories, including the commentary about the way a story was reported, were amplified.

The cumulative effects of this media landscape and related behaviours included the following:

- Heightened awareness of different perspectives on a given story
- Increased likelihood that audiences would notice stories and/or aspects of stories that were not being covered by other news sources, including the BBC
- Erosion of audience confidence that they should fully trust any one source

*“This video has been making the rounds and has been viewed over four million times, that the BBC has still not covered it... Nobody picked it up. Only the Guardian, Google, Apple, Twitter and all that. They picked it up, not the BBC”* (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)

*“You try and balance stuff out yourself these days, you get the hook and try and find it out yourself from several different sources. There is no one news source that says to me it delivers balanced, factual, undramatic, unfluffed news. I think they have all got an angle and a type of delivery that they stick to. It's mainly [the influence of] the internet;*

*it's not just one site. You will be on one, it will feed onto another, you have Facebook, and it will take you to Sky, the BBC, the Mail. There is no one media that for me gives me everything I want" (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*"There are things that have gone viral that maybe the news hasn't actually shared. There are certain videos [on TikTok] where you can make up your own opinion purely from looking at that and thinking 'woah this is extremely scary'" (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*"You can't 100% trust any news sources. I think editors have a choice over what they can say... I'm not saying they lie or anything, but there may be certain details they miss out, whether a higher power has governance over that or not" (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

As perceptions of trust and impartiality are closely linked, a consequence of this heightened awareness and erosion of trust among some audiences is that it can damage perceptions of impartiality too.

### Criticism of the BBC in the media

Audiences highlighted how the BBC receives more criticism in the media, including in relation to its due impartiality, than other broadcasters. They felt this media focus played a role in influencing wider societal perceptions of trust in the BBC's impartiality. They believed this encouraged some people to take a more critical stance towards the BBC, particularly when they did not see their own views reflected in the way a particular story was covered.

*"And you know in the last two or three years there has been this sort of murmuring kind of criticism of BBC bias in some of the newspapers" (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*"The BBC itself is in the news a lot, and other news channels are constantly banging on that the BBC is not impartial and there is a narrative out there that a lot of us have turned away from the BBC, and I am not sure it is just the impartiality bit. I think if I was to watch ITV or Sky, they are very similar, no one can be completely impartial. I do think they probably are impartial, but we are constantly told the BBC is not impartial and the Government are saying they are biased...we are always being told about what's wrong with the BBC, and it almost becomes the truth" (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

## 4. Audiences value BBC news and current affairs but hold them to a high standard

Audiences highlighted a consistent range of strengths associated with BBC news and current affairs

BBC news and current affairs is widely respected for the quality and credibility of its news and current affairs output. BBC news is well regarded in terms of the following attributes:

- High quality and professional reporting
- Global coverage and worldwide reach
- Respected, trusted and familiar presenters and reporters
- A source that is trusted for the big stories and often turned to
- Does not shock or sensationalise but sets out to inform
- Covers the big and complex stories well
- In-depth, comprehensive, and thorough
- Delivers credible, factual information that many rely upon
- Thought of as providing a 'fair' account of the news and including a range of views

These attributes were highlighted across the sample, by audiences with higher BBC engagement but also by audiences with lower BBC engagement.

Many of the examples of BBC reporting used as stimulus material in the research also elicited positive comments in terms of being high quality, including different sides and a range of views, and for being delivered by credible and professional reporters and presenters. In addition, for some audiences with lower BBC engagement, this exposure prompted a reassessment of BBC news compared with their previous perceptions.

*"If I had to sum up the BBC, I always tend to think of it as the gold standard of news, it's the John Lewis of news and current affairs. They always have a correspondent embedded wherever the news is from, if it's Ukraine or Somalia or wherever. There is always someone on hand, giving you the local news. I am quite happy with BBC news"* (Woman, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"Reliable and consistent information. You get accustomed to the presenters in the morning and the way they present a certain story. You see them every day and they make the story feel more personal, the way they relate the story. They are quite consistent with factual information, and this makes them reliable"* (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)

*“The best presenters...very good reporters, articulate BBC reporters. I don’t think it can be beaten. Unsurpassed as a channel. It’s worldwide. You can tell the BBC brand straight away. Listening to the World Service, the quality of news on that is supreme”*  
(Man, 60+ Ballymena, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*“You feel you trust the BBC; I think I trust the people on it. I find that comforting in a way, that you’ve got the same person, you get to know him quite well and whether you get to trust them more because you feel you know them better. I tend to stick to the BBC”*  
(Woman, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)

### BBC current affairs programming is highly valued

*Question Time* in particular was highly valued by a broad range of audiences, despite some older audiences turning away from the programme. Many participants referred to it when summarising the BBC’s due impartiality and it was appreciated for visiting different parts of the UK and allowing the audience to get a sense of how other parts of the country think and feel compared to their own area and outlook. Hearing the different debates helped them form their own opinions about a given topic; they valued audience participation and commended the moderation of the panels.

*“I’m very keen on Question Time, and it was good during Covid. I like a bit of a debate and it does bring up a lot of key news items, and I like the way it goes round different areas and gets different viewpoints... It does give an idea of what the country is thinking as opposed to your local area. My Twitter feed, you sometimes get into a bubble, and you are surrounded by people with the same views as you, and Question Time, moving around the country, you get more of an assorted viewpoint which is good”* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“[I like] Question Time because there are different debates and they come from different communities, and obviously you are never too old to learn something new, and someone else might say something that I didn’t know about, and the more people there are, the more chance you have of learning something new and it helps me to get a balanced view of a topic, and I can make an informed choice rather than just based on information I can get on my own”* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

*Panorama* was more occasionally watched by a small number of participants, but where mentioned it was generally well regarded for its investigative and in-depth reporting, being up to date and including a range of views.

*“Whenever I see a Panorama, I think ‘oh this is going to be juicy and it’s really going to delve into the reporting’” (Woman, 25-34, York, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“I don’t watch it every week, but it’s on the ground, and I think the things they cover are current at the time that they were being investigated. But if it’s on and looks an interesting topic I will always watch” (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

### However, a sense of public ownership creates higher expectations for BBC news

Audiences had higher expectations of BBC news than other news sources. It was seen as having a greater responsibility to reflect the whole country and be representative of their views in the round. For some, these expectations stemmed from its role as a ‘national broadcaster’ without a profit motive, while some linked this to payment of the licence fee and public ownership. While only a minority referred explicitly to the licence fee, most audiences saw BBC news as more accountable ‘to the people’ than other brands because of its unique and privileged position within the news landscape, funded by the licence fee, and felt this justified holding it to high standards.

*“...for BBC there is a greater obligation to reflect the public mood than the for-profit channels” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“It has to be representative of the whole nation. The fact is that it is the national broadcaster, it’s just the broadcaster of the whole nation” (Woman, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“If you don’t represent people from all demographics, you might miss stories that affect them” (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“Well, why should I pay for the NHS? The point is it’s offering an equalising opportunity to everyone in this country. And so, I have absolutely no objection to paying the BBC licence at all. In fact, I think it’s really good value for money, and you know, I would pay for it, even if it costs quite a lot more” (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

Audiences sometimes expressed disappointment with specific BBC coverage they had seen or heard. For some audiences, the strong sense of the BBC’s public ownership and purpose, and the associated sense of greater accountability, meant that a perceived breach of editorial standards by the BBC made them feel a greater sense of disappointment than if the perceived breach had been made by another broadcaster.

*“I am quite judgmental at times towards the BBC as I feel more people are watching, so if they do something wrong it will have more of an impact” (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“It creates brilliant television and radio, and it just seems to be kind of going down the path of being as right wing as possible. I think I jokingly described it to a friend as like an ex-partner who constantly tells you ‘I’m going to change, I’m going to be better’ and you go back to them, and in the end, they are the same again. That’s how I feel about the BBC” (Trans woman, 25-55, London)*

### Some audiences perceive the BBC as pro-establishment and pro-Government of the day

For some participants the BBC was associated with the establishment and this undermined their trust in the organisation. In addition, some participants in Scotland questioned whether the BBC was pro-union, highlighting their, or in some cases their parents’, perceptions of coverage during the Scottish independence referendum in 2014.

*“I think maybe it’s the institution itself [the BBC] that has become too elitist and too establishment... And it gives me less trust in them as a whole” (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)*

*“I feel like the SNP was quite targeted during the independence referendum but that is probably based on their moral stance during that vote as I see them [the BBC] as a branch of the Government” (Man, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

The pro-Government perception amongst some participants stemmed from the assumption that, since the BBC’s funding ultimately depended upon the Government, they would struggle to report stories about them independently. They felt that the BBC either feared the consequences of challenging the Government, or had a vested interest in supporting them, and as a result was reluctant to criticise and challenge the Government in news reporting.<sup>8</sup>

*“The BBC is almost a government-owned company. So, they have got a conflict of interest... You know they’ve got backing from certain Tory party people, so they’ve got to be a little bit more biased towards that party” (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

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<sup>8</sup> Licence fee settlements are usually long-term, lasting for periods of five to six years, and form part of a governing and funding system intended to guarantee the BBC’s independence from Parliament and Government.

*“I watch a lot of interviews with [journalist - Sky] or [journalist - ITV] or anyone else and really, they challenge the government, and they always seem to challenge them a little bit more than the BBC does” (Man, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

*“They have a link with the Government, vis-à-vis the licence fee, so maybe they don’t want to upset the government too much. I don’t hold that against them. The Government [could] try and slap them down if they go against them” (Man, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“The BBC are good at influencing people because they are linked with the Government, so I don’t watch the BBC, I tend to watch ITV” (Woman, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“It is biased towards the establishment...and the Government” (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)*

*“Just because they are for the Government, just because it’s the British Broadcasting, it’s the British news outlet so I believe it’s funded by the Government and if they are funded by the Government why would they be against the Government” (Woman, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

These audiences sometimes saw the BBC as an uncritical mouthpiece of government policy with its public information role during the Covid-19 pandemic (for example, broadcasting the Prime Minister’s regular Covid-19 updates) possibly exacerbating this perception. Some participants highlighted a perceived lack of interrogating of statistics in this context or questioned whether the BBC focused enough on the traumatic impact of Covid-19 restrictions. Some participants felt other news sources interrogated government policy more effectively.

*“They’re constantly criticised as a left-wing and anti-government and I find the complete opposite. I think they are very worried about criticising the Government on the whole” (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“I think it’s quite biased. I think now they’ve got a lot of Tories in there [at the BBC]. I don’t know where the directors [running the organisation] have come from, gas and oil, or the pharmaceutical industry or ex Tories. I trust the BBC a lot less, and they seem to support the Government, and question the government a lot less than I’d like” (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)*

*"I've just got this sense that they are going a bit righter wing, and they are a little bit more Tory than they used to be" (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)*

Other audiences perceived the BBC and its news coverage as having a left-leaning approach and an anti-conservative stance. This perception was occasionally shaped by wider programming where some saw evidence of the BBC having a progressive agenda, which was sometimes seen as an attempt to appeal to younger audiences.

*"A lot of the times the BBC would be reporting things like climate change or LGBT rights and this sort of stuff for example. It's not to say that it isn't interesting, but it does appeal more to one demographic than others.... BBC Three is a big channel and they might push towards more left leaning journalism that young people are more interested in. But they are a public broadcaster and are supposed to be objective" (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*"I can see with my eyes that they are good on diversity, if you look at, for example, at Strictly Come Dancing, it is clearly setting a good benchmark, I see that, I feel it is a good thing, I trust them, it just makes me feel that way" (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

Some participants questioned whether the BBC consistently included more conservative points of view or a counter view to its supposed own left-wing view.

*"BBC Breakfast I think there is left bias to it. They don't bring in a counterview, they bring in opinions that bolster the BBC point of view. I would like to see, not controversy so much, as an opposing opinion" (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*"I mean, you could argue that people are kind of split down the middle in terms of left wing, right wing, conservative liberal. It's pretty much 50/50. The BBC kind of paint the conservative movement and conservative thinking as kind of far right without a proportional counter version of them on the left. Therefore, the BBC has a left leaning bias which is something that they are not supposed to do because as the public service broadcaster it alienates an entire population" (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

Sometimes these criticisms of the BBC from different sides of the political spectrum were also noticed by audiences who interpreted this as a sign that the BBC was providing ‘balance’.

*“If some people think they are too far to the left, and some people think they are too far to the right, then they are about in the middle or providing balance” (Woman, 60+, Liverpool/Warrington, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“I do believe the BBC. I do know that there are many complaints about it being right wing as there are to do with it being left wing, so they must be getting something right in terms of finding balance” (Man, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

### Efforts to reflect a range of views can sometimes feel like ambiguity

To some audiences, the BBC’s style of delivery feels relatively formal and dispassionate which was interpreted in a range of different ways. The pressures of having to appeal to all audiences and reflect a range of views may be driving what came across as an ambiguous style to some participants.

The range of interpretations for this perceived ambiguity included:

- The BBC being “politically correct” and playing it safe
- Having a fear of offending and shying away from being too controversial
- The BBC is too afraid of the Government of the day and therefore does not ask the hard questions.

*“There are no hard questions asked, it’s very safe now. I used to watch it growing up but now it’s just boring” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“I find it is politically correct all the time, it seems to be a little bit nicer. I feel like it is reporting properly, but it doesn’t cross any borders with others, particularly radio, they just seem to say whatever they feel like, but with the BBC it’s all ‘the BBC’ and collar and tie, and they don’t report the whole story they just report the good bit of the story without offending anybody” (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“The BBC should stop being so vague. They need to stand up for something. It’s all a bit wishy-washy. I don’t know what the BBC thinks, and I have no idea what they stand for.”*

*There's nothing fresh or exciting"* (Woman, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)

Among audiences who felt this way, BBC reporting came across as non-committal compared to their preferred sources. These preferred sources were seen as more engaging, expressing a stronger point of view and having presenters that were prepared to challenge more robustly.

*"I wouldn't necessarily go to BBC news; I would much rather be watching Channel 4 News because they are a bit more controversial. Even the reporters just seem to be genuinely more diverse, and they just talk about much more diverse topics"* (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)

*"Cancel culture, there is a fear of having an opinion these days and they are tip toeing around issues all the time, whereas something like LBC if you get a right-wing point of view, it's a right-wing point of view, but at least it makes the left-wing guy feel uncomfortable and vice versa, whereas the BBC, they don't really seem to be able to nail anybody down and hold them accountable. It's all wishy-washy type and it's not proper journalism"* (Man, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"I just find the way it's delivered is just boring and doesn't really hold much interest. If I have a choice between that and say Sky News, I'd much rather watch Sky News than BBC. It's the way it's presented, it's just in general. It's just it hasn't moved with the times. It's kind of stagnant"* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

These perceptions serve as a reminder that while some audiences called for the BBC to be impartial by 'sticking to the facts' there are challenges with this position. News has to engage as well as inform and some audiences rely on the news to help them make their mind up about a topic or story. Both of these needs from the news can, for some audiences, mean they sometimes want to hear opinions and points of view being more strongly expressed and/or challenged within their news and current affairs sources.

## The research identified ways BBC news is delivering value to different audiences and communities, but also highlighted challenges for the broadcaster in delivering for them

### Some Black audiences want the BBC to reflect a greater range of nuanced views

Some Black participants acknowledged the strengths of BBC news coverage, particularly in terms of providing reliable and factual information. Some also valued the familiarity and sense of relationship they had with BBC presenters, for example on breakfast TV, as well as efforts to bring in more diverse presenters overall.

*“I would go to BBC for unbiased news because I know I can go to BBC for factual news. I wouldn’t defend them on the whole unbiased point. Sometimes news reporters have their own agenda and that can be thrown in sometimes” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“90% [of the BBC’s general coverage] comes across as factual and they do go to other sources. Like Covid and masks, they went to certain manufacturers of masks, and they are quite factual” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“They are reliable and consistent in the information they give. You get accustomed to the presenters in the morning and the way they present a certain story. You see them every day and they make the story feel more personal the way they relate the story” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“I feel like recently they brought forward people with different backgrounds to write the articles. So, you have people, for example, talking about the issues going on in Mali and it will be somebody who is from an African descent, for example. So, they really try to bring in reporters to write articles, and they are diverse” (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)*

In terms of due impartiality, some Black participants questioned how their perspectives were represented by the BBC and whether a greater range of viewpoints from Black audiences should be included. Among these participants, when thinking about the BBC there was a sense that the coverage had a tendency to treat them as a homogeneous group, with predictable, uniform, left-leaning attitudes to the major issues of the day, when the reality was more diverse and individual. For example, some held conservative views and not all Black participants were positive about the Black Lives Matter movement. As a result, they felt more could be done to recognise the nuanced complexity and political diversity within the Black population and reflect this range of views in BBC coverage. Some participants suspected that there may be a

reluctance to challenge movements like Black Lives Matter, for example, because of fear of offending.

*“There are Black people who are critical of BLM [Black Lives Matter] ...but you never see or hear their point of view” (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)*

*“There is a kind of left-wing myth like a culture that is being held up as the culture of a different ethnic group. What they won't tell you, for example, is that a lot of people from the Caribbean, a lot of them happen to be quite conservative. But you watch the BBC, you wouldn't think that, you would think they all come from council estates and this sort of stuff” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“I went to the BLM movement in 2020 in Hyde Park. There was either violence or there was peace. You could just interview people who went to the protest and get different points of view, but I haven't really seen the BBC doing that. It's more to do with reflecting the anger...But from the other point of view, in terms of what the Black Lives Matter movement actually stands for, and how it was founded, what the real manifesto of the movement stands for, it is not covered. And those views aren't necessarily being reported because there is a political element where if you say something bad about a person in an ethnic minority, you know you will get in trouble. And so, people are kind of scared to say these things” (Man, 20-35, London, Black Afro-Caribbean group)*

*“Black Lives Matter was so much in the media, I think, that they didn't want to offend anyone. They didn't want to come across as if they were reporting from a perspective that was against Black Lives Matter, because of all of the issues that had come up. So, I think they were very cautious about doing that” (Woman, 30-45, Bristol, Black African group)*

### Muslim participants respect the quality of BBC news but feel other brands offer better coverage of important topics

Muslim participants highlighted many positive points about BBC news and current affairs. These included that it provides:

- A comprehensive range of news sources
- Worldwide coverage
- A trusted, reliable and established news source
- Good coverage of the major events and stories
- A non-sensationalised approach.

*"[The BBC] have more sources and good accessibility. They are worldwide. It is something people know and trust, across radio and TV" (Woman, 30-55, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"I do watch the BBC coverage when it comes to any major events, whether that be elections, be it national or worldwide. I much prefer the BBC's coverage because other news channels sensationalise it. The BBC come across really well (Woman, 30-55, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"It's a well-known brand. You go over on holiday, you switch on the TV, and BBC World News comes up and it's a source that I would look at...And if something's happened in Pakistan, they've got reporters there" (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

However, some Muslim participants indicated that sources like Al Jazeera were better regarded for coverage of issues and topics that they felt were important. From their point of view, providers like Al Jazeera were more duly impartial, and less biased, when reporting stories about the Middle East compared to western sources like the BBC. In addition, some participants recalled other UK sources, such as ITV, as having Muslim reporters that also covered issues of interest to the audience.

*"I just feel like Al Jazeera, the headquarters is in Qatar, and I think certain humanitarian issues, especially when it comes to Muslim countries, they've been outspoken. Whereas BBC, being in the UK, I just I don't feel like there's been that good relationship, and there has always been that bias. So, I just feel like from my perspective, that Al Jazeera, it spells out correctly for you, tells you what it is, what's happening on the ground, and things like that, and they won't kind of retract anything, whereas with BBC, I feel like sometimes they just stay back from mentioning that, because it might kind of mark their name down or something like that" (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

*"I was watching Good Morning Britain, and basically, they've got [ITV presenter] on there. And he was the only person I've seen talk about Yemen and things that are happening in Afghanistan, and things that are happening in Palestine." (Man, 25-45, Oldham, Muslim group)*

Further criticisms also emerged around the BBC's due impartiality with respect to Muslim audiences. However, whilst some of this criticism was directed at the BBC specifically, participants also attributed these issues to the wider UK media. The specific issues raised included:

- The reporting of potential domestic terrorist incidents. Participants suggested a lack of impartiality in the way different perpetrators were described and reported
  - For example, being treated differently in reporting based on the ethnicity of the perpetrator
- Coverage of Israel/Palestine
- Whether the BBC included enough alternative views, for example public figures that were known to be supportive of their viewpoints
- Some also perceived the BBC as slower than other news providers to represent minority ethnic groups in its presenters and reporters

*“Isn’t it the same as when a Muslim blows up somebody, we don’t get to hear his side of the story. We just get to hear, this is what he did, he made a bomb, and blew himself up, and not whether he had mental health issues. But when a White person goes ahead and does it, we hear all about the mental health issues”* (Woman, 30-55, Oldham, Muslim group)

*“The BBC took ages to catch up with other news channels when it comes to representing ethnic minorities. They have always wanted to appeal to the White, more well-to-do parts of societies”* (Woman, 30-55, Oldham, Muslim group)

### Jewish participants trust BBC news but question the BBC’s due impartiality in coverage of Israel/Palestine

The BBC was seen as a trustworthy source of information for some participants, especially relied upon for the big stories of the day including international coverage.

*“I trust more the international reporting. The UK reporting, I take with a pinch of salt, so I think it is biased. But internationally, I think that they do report well”* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

*“Actually, when they do their live kind of reports on the ground, I do find those that are quite good”* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

*“Trustworthy but a bit boring”* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

Some of these participants were particularly sensitive to coverage of Israel/Palestine and questioned both whether the narrative of the conflict was biased against Israeli viewpoints and whether it adopted an overly simplistic take on complex issues.

Reactions to the reports shown in the research that related to Israel/Palestine further revealed the sensitivities surrounding the topic. Similar to Muslim participants, Jewish participants were also critical of the precise terminology used when reporting such topics and felt that the BBC was not always reporting the issues with due impartiality.

[Reacting to a BBC report covering the escape of six Palestinian men from an Israeli prison]

*“The reporter at the end says that the Palestinians are tried by a military court and Jews living in the occupied territory are tried by a civil court. Well, the Jews living there, are they murdering people? Are they intent on carrying out terrorist attacks? It’s like hold on a second, if an Israeli citizen did the same thing, I can assure you they’d be treated exactly the same way as criminals on the Palestinian side. It’s like ‘hold on’, you’re comparing apples and pears”* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

Some Jewish participants felt there was a lack of due impartiality in coverage of Israeli perspectives regarding Israel/Palestine by wider media and not just the BBC. Coverage was seen as one sided and omitting the full story in their view, meaning there was a general lack of understanding of the history and context of the issues being reported.

*“I think they all have a large degree of bias. There’s always some of the story missing”* (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

*“I think so much biased reporting has stained people’s views, it’s been very difficult to change it”* (Woman, 35-55, Jewish group)

*“...[talking about coverage of Israel/Palestine in general] you have to strip everything back to the bone and tell the story exactly as we know it and we understand it, but the wider world doesn’t see it as they get one view...”* (Woman, 35-55, London, Jewish group)

More specifically, the BBC’s report of the antisemitic attack on a bus in London had further eroded trust in the service for some participants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In response to complaints about the report, the BBC’s Executive Complaints Unit [said](#) that the BBC should have recognised at an earlier stage that there was genuine doubt about the accuracy of what it had reported. It found that the BBC’s reporting of the attack did not meet the BBC’s standards of due accuracy and due impartiality because it

*“The BBC reported that these Orthodox Jews were being anti-Muslim, but they weren’t. They were just speaking their own language” (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)*

*“They were saying they were shouting back at them to provoke them, but they weren’t, they were calling for help... It doesn’t get the facts right and it needs to get the facts right before they report, they are presumptuous” (Man, 35-55, London, Jewish group)*

### Some lesbian, gay and bisexual participants highlight issues relating to BBC news

Some LGBTQ+ audiences were critical of BBC news coverage and how it reported on issues that were relevant to them. Lesbian and gay participants were also critical about the BBC’s approach to reporting issues affecting trans people. Specifically in terms of audience perceptions of the BBC’s due impartiality, some felt that the BBC was, at times, biased against trans people in its coverage of issues affecting them, while others questioned how it reported other stories relating to LGBTQ+ people.

More broadly, some LGBTQ+ participants expressed concerns about what they perceived as an editorial ‘shift to the right’ and a feeling that the BBC was more ‘pro-conservative’ in its reporting.

*“I wouldn’t necessarily go to the BBC usually on trans rights. I remember listening to BBC Radio 4, and they gave a full 15 minutes to the lecturer who resigned for her gender critical views. And there were no opposing views. They didn’t give any time to anybody else other than her opinion, and the woman interviewing her, she had clear support for what she was saying. And then in later interviews I then hear her being very pushy on those, you can see that she holds those views, and that she’s trying to steer the conversation in a direction that would put any other view in a negative light” (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)*

*“Whereas the BBC at the moment it tends to be a bit more pro-Conservative. You can see the shift, whereas when it was under a Labour government, it wasn’t that much. It was still quite balanced. But now it’s not so, I don’t know” (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

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failed to reflect alternative views about what had been said. The BBC’s reports of this incident are also subject (at the time of publication of this research) to an Ofcom investigation.

*“It was about the publications and sexual assault figures and the way it was reported, basically they removed a whole set of victims from it. Because they’ve obviously got a sense of the homophobia out there and the LGBT community” (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)*

*“The BBC did kind of side with [a commentator] over her kind of anti-trans statements, and I kind of realised that I think I disengaged with the BBC around about that point (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)*

*“BBC news I think there is more prevalence to controversy around transgender issues...like they used the word ‘row’ in the title” (Woman, 25-40, London, LGB group)*

### Trans participants are more critical of the BBC’s due impartiality, as well as the wider media

Some of the strongest feelings on BBC coverage came from trans participants who, more than other audience groups, reported that some issues highlighted in the news were core to their own identity and existence. There was a perception among some trans participants that the BBC was taking an anti-trans rights stance in its coverage. In some cases, BBC coverage of issues affecting trans people had prompted them to take a stance and stop watching BBC News.

*“I currently boycott BBC news; I don’t watch it all. It is a personal and political choice because of the way they have handled transgender issues across the platform. There seems to be a real bias. There is an internal memorandum within the BBC that if you’re going to have a transgender person talking about transgender rights, then you absolutely have to have someone on the other side talking about how there shouldn’t be those rights. I made the decision about two years ago to not deliberately watch BBC news...It was an important thing for me because I felt like if you’re not going to show me any respect to someone who’s your consumer and your customer, then I’m not going to give you my custom” (Trans woman, 25-55, London)*

*“I think the things that I associate with BBC news are quite unpleasant and quite unfortunate. It’s a great shame. Unfortunately, it feels very much like there has been a slide towards the right. It was overcompensating on becoming less progressive, righter wing.... It definitely feels pandering to the right (Trans woman, 25-55, London)*

As with other sensitive news topics, criticism was not just directed at the BBC, but also the wider media. Some trans participants highlighted how the media fell short of due impartiality by not

including a wide enough range of opinions of trans people, including more positive and less controversial or contested perspectives. From their point of view the media in general often adopted a narrow lens on trans people in terms of only focusing on trans women and not trans men, focusing on the debate around biological sex and gender identity (e.g. whether trans women should have access to single sex public bathrooms and participate in women’s sports competitions) and tending to emphasise controversies and negative stories in their coverage. Some felt that this coverage has had a direct impact on how they were treated by society.

*“The media overly focuses on transgender women. This amounts to more danger for transgender women. It often portrays us as these predatory people wanting to sneak into bathrooms to abuse women. I wish they would stop it with the bathroom discourse. It makes it materially difficult for us to go about our lives. At Victoria Station there is a gender-neutral bathroom and it has happened to me that I was mocked by a bunch of guys doing a TikTok or taking pictures of me and people going into the bathroom”* (Trans woman, 25-55, London)

*“They [the media in general] always present contested stories that stir up the debate. There is a much broader range of trans topics than just gender recognition, bathrooms and sports competition that could be of interest to the public. You could speak to trans people about how they are affected in their daily life for example. You know most trans people I know don’t do any physical activities because of the debate. Surely that’s an issue”* (Trans man, 25-55, London)

### Younger audiences tend to feel less connected with BBC news overall but value BBC news online for its reliability

Younger audiences tended to be less attached to BBC news compared to older audiences. The broadcaster was relatively less ingrained in their lives and memories compared to older participants, who had very much ‘grown up’ with the BBC. To these younger participants the BBC sometimes felt more aimed at older generations, although some acknowledged efforts to engage younger generations and they also demonstrated a closer relationship with output such as Radio 1 news updates.

*“I think they try and aim at everyone, but I think when it comes to things like Countryfile it’s more for older people... although they have things like CBeebies and they have tried to bring back BBC Three”* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

*“There is a bias towards older generation. There’s an assumption that young people don’t engage with the news”* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

*“I only really use the BBC for the weather, to be honest, and then when I listen to the BBC Radio 1 news in the morning, sometimes that's just to get sort of like what's going on in that day. You know what I mean? because I feel like I don't know about anyone else, but I feel like the radio, BBC Radio 1, it always seems a little bit more genuine than the actual BBC news channel. Maybe because it seems to be appealing to a younger audience or something. I don't know” (Woman, 18-24, Belfast, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

However, younger audiences did engage with BBC news and current affairs output, sometimes in broadcast TV content but particularly online. Many younger participants did trust and value the BBC's reliability and due impartiality, often commending it for its good coverage, reliable factual content, as well as educational depth. The BBC was often a source turned to for more serious news coverage, including when they wanted to check out the validity of a story they had come across on social media.

[Comments from younger audiences about BBC News]

*“I think they are quite a good news source as you are familiar with what they do, their programmes are more educational, so you think they will be able to present the news in more depth” (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

*“I think for me the fact that there's a there's a variety of different platforms. So, like this BBC 1, BBC Radio 1 or whatever. And then there's different news and the BBC Parliament is like different brands within the brand. I think that is a positive for them” (Man, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

*“BBC does a lot of live interviews which means they can't predict the answers and force their own narrative” (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

*“I think they are quite impartial, using different sources but also if they do use a source which is less reliable, they will counter it with something” (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

*“I think they are quite widespread; they do try and cover the different age gaps. Since I've grown up, I've always felt you couldn't go wrong by watching the BBC” (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“The BBC is a source I would usually go to as I always feel it gives well-informed information on a news story and they have good global reach on a lot of the stories” (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“Trustworthy. Foreign. Serious. Sort of just a lot of English politics”* (Woman, 18-24, Belfast, core group, medium BBC engagement)

*“I don’t feel personally there is too much political bias in it, I wouldn’t say its 100% neutral but there isn’t too much, so I prefer it over other news sources”* (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*“Trusted, reliable, stale and stiff upper lip”* (Woman, 18-24, Leeds, core group, medium BBC engagement)

However, in terms of perceptions of the BBC’s due impartiality, some younger participants felt that more could be done to ensure the inclusion of the views of young people and their first-hand perspectives in BBC news coverage. This was primarily an issue of representation, as they felt overlooked, but was also about helping ensure that older audiences better understood younger people’s perspectives. From their point of view BBC coverage sometimes fell short of including a range of views, by not featuring the views of young people in news stories that directly affected them.

[Reacting to BBC news coverage of Covid-19 in schools]

*“I find it a bit annoying [that young people are not portrayed more] I know what is going on, but older people who are watching it might not fully understand what’s going on because children are not involved”* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

*“I think it’s important that youth get interviewed in the news as this is a story about young people and we didn’t hear any opinions from them, so it makes it less impartial in this case”* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

*“When they’re talking about schools, they’re talking about it with such an outside point of view. It’s not aimed at school pupils, but at adults to know about what’s going on in schools. We’re not told things to us, it’s just them talking to adults.”* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

### Some audiences in Scotland are critical of BBC news

Participants in Scotland who had a clear preference for independence tended to believe that there was a favouritism shown towards the ‘No’ vote during the Scottish independence

referendum. They attributed this to the BBC being pro-establishment and inherently favouring continued union with the rest of the UK. From their perspective, not including enough coverage of the arguments in favour of Scottish independence had been the BBC's most notable failure to preserve due impartiality. The anger felt about this at the time had caused some to actively turn away from the BBC with a degree of resentment still apparent among a small number of participants. However, in contrast others felt that the Scottish National Party are given too much airtime and are not sufficiently challenged in the news.

*"I've always seen the BBC as an arm of the Government... When it comes to big decisions in Scotland like the referendum you see that side. Although it could just be a suspicion with us being raised SNP"* (Man, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"When it came to the referendum, especially BBC Scotland... I felt she [Nicola Sturgeon] got so much airtime that her point was coming across a lot more than others. I felt that was unfair"* (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*"They [the BBC] seem left wing when it comes to the Government side of things, my dad and I sit and discuss it at lunch. Well, my dad might be talking and I am just listening... During [the referendum on] independence I felt the UK news gave a lot of airtime to Nicola Sturgeon. Especially BBC Scotland: it was Sturgeon, Sturgeon, Sturgeon"* (Woman, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)

The BBC news at a UK level was seen, by some, to be dominated more by Westminster and English issues, and they felt BBC Scotland was more focused on the Central Belt in Scotland, especially Glasgow and Edinburgh. Some participants felt that sources such as STV better represent Scotland as a whole and explore Scottish issues in more depth. In addition, some questioned whether the BBC had a tendency to take a negative stance towards the SNP in its political coverage during election time, as well as towards the Labour Party. Others struggled to articulate why they disliked the BBC. For some it had been ingrained over a long period of time and something they had grown up with.

*"The BBC is a lot of the time focused on just down south"* (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*"Borders and ITV, there was a lot more about Scotland, and things about Scotland that you very rarely hear on the BBC."* (Man, 45-59, Dumfries, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“There’s a very low proportion of Borders and Dumfries and Galloway ever mentioned. So usually, if I want to try and get bits and pieces about what’s going on, I’ll actually going to the people who work in that area, and I get more through that on Facebook”* (Man, 45-59, Dumfries, lower BBC engagement)

*“It’s rare [for Scotland to be mentioned], Scotland’s a second-class country. They get skipped over pretty quickly”* (Man, 45-59, Dumfries, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“In the past when they [the BBC] have been talking mainly about politicians I feel they are biased about it, I feel they are all for the Tory party and they don’t want to say bad things about the Tory party or the Royal Family...I feel if there is a general election they maybe say bad things about the SNP and Labour but not so much about Tories but this is just what I remember”* (Woman, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“A lot of it [opinion of the BBC] will be about your family’s history with it and the way they portray the BBC as well. The more negative stuff you get [from your family] and the social stigma of it as well of it being biased. It’s not like every story but when you pick up on that with something you are really focused on you then go “what is going on there?”* (Man, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

However, watching examples of BBC and STV coverage in the groups sometimes led to reappraisal among those who no longer watch the BBC and instead rely on STV for their news. Some participants were sometimes pleasantly surprised by how balanced and duly impartial they felt the BBC coverage was and in contrast felt that the STV coverage was too uncritical in its approach, particularly towards the SNP. For example, some participants who felt STV was strong on seeking a range of opinions questioned some of the specific STV news stories and clips they saw during the research.

[Reacting to STV news coverage of the development of wind farms in Scotland]

*“STV don’t just fix in on one opinion they look more at every opinion”* (Woman, Dundee, 25-34, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“I suppose now you look, it was totally buzzing for what the SNP has put it in place...I thought that this wasn’t very typical of them [STV] but maybe it is I am not sure now, looking at that I’m maybe questioning (it) now”* (Woman, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“What I did notice was although I do still see the BBC as being a kind of propaganda Government owned news source, they are a lot more impartial than other news sources.*

*Like STV for example, I've started to notice it? rarely reports any facts and just big up all the benefits that could come from stuff especially when it comes to Scotland. After I watched a few of those video clips I started to notice it on the news and I thought they have not said one fact through the whole report they are all what ifs and what could be"* (Woman, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"STV makes the English politicians look bad and the BBC makes the Scottish politicians look bad and with the stories they always focus on the SNP ministers right now I feel it's to take some of the flak away from Boris"* (Man, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"I did think they [the BBC] were less impartial than other news sources but that is because political affiliation is strongly SNP up here but after watching more of the news sources I do feel they are a lot more impartial than other news sources that are other news sources"* (Man, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)

### Local reporting is valued in Northern Ireland

All main UK news channels were perceived to be disengaged from the Northern Ireland audience and not fully understanding the complexities of the different communities. For news about Northern Ireland as a whole, UTV News and BBC Newsline were seen to be much more likely to cover relevant stories fairly and accurately. However, for some audiences in the west of Northern Ireland, UTV was perceived to be better than the BBC for its local coverage.

*"So, I follow BBC Northern Ireland, and I find it very limited, like compared to the likes of UTV. They were maybe putting up three stories, the BBC were only putting up one"* (Man, 35-44, Derry/Londonderry, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"I always went to UTV. The BBC just isn't our news, that's just my perception of it"* (Man, 35-44, Derry/Londonderry, core group, lower BBC engagement)

At a more general level, some participants in Northern Ireland questioned whether the reason the BBC was (in their view) conservative in its coverage was due to a reluctance to cause any controversy.

*"I feel like the BBC is very conservative and they don't want to cause any upset. They just want to have this clean report without rocking the boat with"* (Man, 35-44, Derry/Londonderry, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*“Sometimes I just find the BBC a bit one sided, I don’t know whether that’s because of how they are funded. There’s just no objectivity in it” (Man, 35-44, Derry/Londonderry, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“BBC One is the least impartial, because it only reports on things it thinks are right, or that they want the public to think” (Woman, 18-24, Belfast, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

*“I think BBC could be reporting from the area that I live in. It still wouldn’t feel local to me. It just feels like it’s a very, you know, English. Sort of think it doesn’t feel like people talk for me anyway” (Man, 18-24, Belfast, core group, medium BBC engagement)*

### Audiences in Wales raised fewer challenges compared to other nations

Perceptions of BBC news among participants in Wales were often consistent with the wider sample in terms of seeing it as a high quality and trusted source of news. In terms of perceptions of the BBC’s due impartiality in general, audiences in Wales shared similar views to the wider sample but, for Wales specifically, the main issue with respect to due impartiality was a perceived lack of coverage, by national news providers in Wales, of perspectives from North Wales compared to Cardiff and South Wales.

The BBC, along with most other news sources, was criticised for this and some felt that online stories needed to be updated more frequently than they felt they currently were. However, despite these issues, audiences in Wales did value BBC online content being tailored to Wales as a whole, and being able to self-select Wales content through the BBC News app.

*“You watch Wales Today a lot of the Wales reporting is focused on South Wales, you get the odd snippet of north, so there is a bias in that BBC Wales is tailored to the south and not the north” (Woman, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“I would use Wrexham news; Wales Online tends to be more on South Wales than North Wales. They are more about the South than North Wales, so I never use it, when I did use it I got that impression” (Man, 45-59, Wrexham, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“In terms of mid Wales [the BBC app] is pretty good, and you can also tailor it to your own stories so you can pick what topics you want on your feed, so I’m trying to do that as well. A lot of stuff about Wales and then it is all tailored to whatever you want” (Man, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

*“What you do find is [the BBC app] will be two or three days out of date because they haven't got as much news. It's not always up to date. So, you look at the story and find it was three days old. But it does have the main stories of interest for me” (Man, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

## **The impartiality of BBC TV, radio and online news are judged differently by audiences in light of their distinct roles**

**In terms of perceptions of impartiality, BBC TV tends to face more challenges from audiences compared to news on its other platforms**

BBC TV news tended to be subject to greater challenges by audiences compared to the other BBC platforms. The main TV bulletins were seen to reflect many of the strengths identified across BBC news output, particularly in terms of being high quality and professional. However, main TV bulletins were also the source of more of the criticisms around due impartiality compared to radio and online. Audiences were most likely to believe they perceived reporters' opinions through softer signals such as their tone of voice, demeanour and expressions in TV reporting. In contrast they felt news delivered online was more factual, they felt it was harder to construe what the BBC was 'thinking' and any opinion or analysis pieces were more clearly delineated.

Audiences also felt network TV news had the greatest responsibility to deliver impartial stories. They pointed out that TV news programmes were seen as authoritative and reached large numbers of viewers, and therefore had most potential to be highly influential. In addition, TV viewers were a more captive audience, required to view the news agenda as the BBC presented it to them, rather than being able to select stories of interest as they would online. Any perceived breaches of editorial standards in terms of due impartiality were therefore more noticeable and had a greater impact when perceived via TV output.

*“The online stories always come across as quite impartial because there is no emotion put into that, it's just factual reporting. Whereas when you hear it on the TV, the demeanour of the people reporting it, the way that they report it, and the way they talk about it that all gets an influence on it” (Man, 25-34, Dundee, core group, lower BBC engagement)*

*“With radio and TV, it's live, and there are people involved with views about certain topics... in news articles they would just reference it, whereas when you are interviewing*

*on TV you have people with strong views on a certain topic” (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)*

*“When you are reading something, you don’t know who has written it, you don’t know much about them, and their thought process... Whereas when you see first-hand you make your opinion based on their body language and the way they speak, and things like that” (Man, 18-24, Glasgow, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

### Relationships drive perceptions of radio news and current affairs

Some audiences actively chose to listen to news on BBC radio and did so out of habit, particularly in the mornings. Audiences that were engaging with BBC radio news and current affairs tended to have a closer relationship with the platform and its programming and therefore judged it in more favourable terms. These participants tended to be familiar with the presenters and reporters and were more likely to commend the efforts they went to with regards to due impartiality. For example, BBC Radio 4’s flagship news programme *Today* was praised by regular listeners for challenging different sides with relevant counter arguments throughout the course of a programme.

*“Particularly Radio 4 in the morning. It’s a good example. It was good interviewing by [BBC presenter], I think she interviewed one side and then she interviewed the other. The big story was the energy price cap. That morning it came out and she had a Labour MP on, and she had a Conservative MP after that. And, of course what the Labour MP said you should be taxing BP, Shell whatever.... she gave a counter argument to the Labour argument. When the Conservative came on, what she put to him was that these oil companies are making tremendous profits. Why aren’t you putting up their taxes this year? So, she used the two different slants in total” (Man, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)*

### BBC online news was challenged less in terms of due impartiality due to its more factual content

Of all the BBC news platforms, the app and website were used by the widest range of participants, which included younger as well as older audiences. BBC news online was highly valued for being reliable, accurate and factual. Online news articles were perceived as providing clear descriptions and explanations, as well as summarising information, and participants felt it was easy to tailor the content according to their preferences.

The perceived due impartiality of BBC news online was challenged less by respondents compared to BBC TV news. This was due to the main focus being on factual and descriptive

information, with any opinions being more clearly presented in analysis sections. In addition, given that many adopted a 'skim and scan' approach to consuming news online, audiences were easily able to ignore or avoid any articles where they felt the topic would not interest them, or they might be irritated by it.

*"I mean, the BBC news app, I think is second to none. I just think it's so very clear. Very concise, but very factual and very kind of bullet pointy, which is what I want from the news. I mean more and more, particularly recently, that's been my absolutely go to source. I spend a lot of time travelling and a lot of time just flitting from one thing to another. And so, it's easy for me with the BBC app just to grab my news on the go"*  
(Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)

*"I don't read the news app for you to tell me how to think. I read the news to find out what is going on and then I go away and think about it."* (Woman, 25-34, York, core group, higher BBC engagement)

### Several factors contribute to criticism of BBC TV

In addition to platform choice shaping audience judgements, there was evidence that BBC TV news was also judged differently when compared to other TV broadcast brands. This was in terms of both performance and perceptions of due impartiality. The research revealed several factors that may be driving this:

- Audiences had higher expectations of BBC TV news than other TV news and were as a result more inclined to hold it to account
- Participants felt the BBC had to satisfy a wider range of audiences compared to other broadcasters, which may in turn constrain its style of reporting
- Other broadcasters were seen as being less constrained in comparison and more able to target and satisfy their specific audience

*"Pretty much everyone has access to BBC news and it's the best known of all of them, so I think people have higher standards of them"* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

*"I think that a lot of people watch other channels that suit their desires for entertainment. And I think that the BBC often is considered a little more highbrow, and so its audience may be a more critical group for that reason"* (Woman, 60+, Aberystwyth, core group, higher BBC engagement)

*"I think it's [BBC News in general] trying to compete, and it's dumbing down, and I think it's trying too hard, and I don't think it knows exactly what its audience necessarily is. I think it's almost trying to find its way, and I feel like it's trying to sort of be like a magazine style programme, and a little bit softer, to have a greater appeal. But actually, I think it doesn't. It doesn't do what it's intended, and it actually turns more people off because people think 'I'm not actually sure this is what I want'. It's hard to explain, but it feels very watered-down news, rather than anything that's going to please someone"* (Woman, 45-59, Gillingham, core group, lower BBC engagement)

*"It [the BBC] just recognises that it needs to pull in news from elsewhere to make sure it's got a broader view, whereas perhaps the other ones are happy enough just getting what they want from whichever channel speaks their language. I think they know who their audiences are and so do kind of feed that, whereas the BBC has such a broad audience, and because it is the kind of the old guard and the others can be more modern"* (Man, 25-55, London, LGB group)

*"I think some of these [news brands] have more of a base of solid supporters, whereas BBC viewers you are just watching it as a news source so you wouldn't give it 10/10 for impartiality because you don't feel very strongly towards it. Whereas some sources you have more of a connection to"* (16-17, South Wales, youth triad)

*"I just think the BBC tread very carefully with what they say because the BBC are in for a lot of stick"* (Woman, 65-75, Manchester, digitally excluded)

## Conclusions

In general, audiences continue to regard BBC news as a reliable and trusted source and they value the high quality and professionalism of its journalism. They also generally consider it a duly impartial source, but audiences do not judge the BBC's news and current affairs' impartiality in isolation. Their perceptions of the accuracy and quality of its news, and whether they trust it, are all closely bound with their perceptions of its due impartiality. Where the BBC is perceived as falling short in any one of these, this can then impact their perceptions of its due impartiality. When audiences feel let down by the BBC the sense of disappointment is particularly profound because of its unique place in many audiences' lives, the stronger sense of public ownership and because there is an enduring sense that they trust the BBC to get things right.

On the other hand, when audiences perceive the BBC's news and current affairs' as performing positively on these other criteria, this can make them more likely to consider the BBC duly impartial. The positive reception of the BBC's coverage of the war in Ukraine demonstrates this, as audiences turned to the BBC for trusted and authoritative news during a time of crisis and the value of its due impartiality became clearer for them.

Maintaining and improving perceptions of due impartiality is still a significant challenge for the BBC because so many factors shape audience judgements and because it needs to represent and serve the diverse audiences of all the UK's nations and regions. Perceptions of the BBC and due impartiality are driven not only by the content, but also by wider contextual factors, which have a significant impact on how people judge news sources and reports. Feelings about identity and personal values amplify emotional reactions to news stories and reports, particularly as social media plays an important role in audience engagement with news. As audiences react more strongly to coverage of stories they feel closest to, the BBC, in order to satisfy different audiences, is expected to provide high quality coverage of a vast range of different news topics, in order to meet their range of expectations. The research also revealed the scale and complexity of the challenge of successfully carrying out due impartiality in the current cultural climate and ever-changing news landscape.

In attempting to include a range of views in order to satisfy audiences, the BBC can appear to some audiences as if it lacks a clear, engaging point of view. More audiences perceive bias by omission, highlighting what they feel is 'not being covered' in the news, particularly audiences who are more likely to consume news online from a range of sources, such as younger groups. The BBC faces greater scrutiny and is held to higher levels of public accountability due to its distinct and unique position in the media landscape and audiences also highlight how the BBC tends to receive more criticism from the media on due impartiality than other broadcasters.

The due impartiality of BBC TV, radio and online news are judged differently by audiences in light of their distinct roles. Some audiences actively chose to listen to news and current affairs on BBC radio and tended to have more of relationship with the platform and its programming, and therefore judged it in more favourable terms.

BBC news online is challenged less due to its reliable factual content which is highly valued. TV still tends to be subject to greater challenge by audiences compared to the other BBC platforms. While main TV bulletins are seen to reflect high quality and professionalism, audiences are most likely to believe they perceive reporters' opinions, through softer signals, such as their tone of voice, demeanour and expressions in TV reporting. As news online is more factual, audiences feel it is harder to construe what the BBC is 'thinking' and any opinion or analysis pieces are more clearly delineated.

Ultimately audience confidence and trust in the BBC's approach to due impartiality will continue to rest on the BBC delivering accurate, high quality and trusted news. As it enhances and reinforces these qualities, our research has also highlighted the value of the two linked principles of 'seeking a range of views' and 'challenging those views', when delivering duly impartial news and current affairs content to audiences.

## Appendix

A qualitative approach was taken among audiences across the UK. There were two different stages to the research; the first stage was the core of the project, and included extended focus group sessions, triads and depth interviews; these were supplemented by a second stage of reconvened depth interviews amongst a selection of participants from across the first stage of the research. All fieldwork was conducted online.

### Pre-tasks

All participants were asked to complete a pre-task exercise over a 6-day period prior to attending the sessions. This consisted of the following four components:

The first component comprised a series of usage and attitude questions which explored participants' news consumption behaviour, exploring the role that news played in their lives, which sources they engaged with, how, why, and what they liked about the way they reported the news, and finally how they defined good quality news reporting.

For the second component, participants were then asked to complete a news diary over 2 days. The news diary was completed on WhatsApp and intended to get people thinking about their news consumption prior to attending the group sessions. Participants were asked to highlight stories that they were following in the news and what they thought about the way the stories were reported and covered. The idea behind this was to enable them to talk about their perceptions in a more reflective way within the group sessions. It also helped us to understand the individual behaviours and attitudes as they happened, rather than relying on subsequent recall which would not be as reliable.

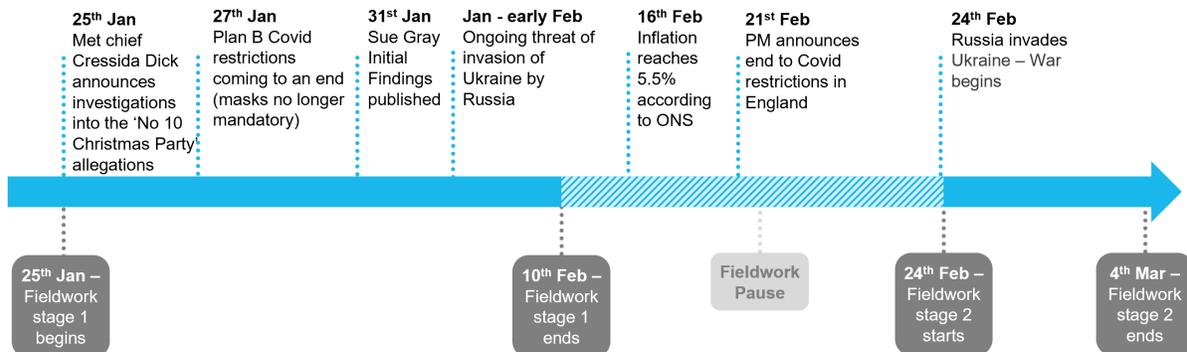
In the third component participants commented on three recent news report or current affairs programme excerpts (one BBC and two other brands). Each one covered a different news topic. Participants were asked to engage with the excerpt and describe what they liked or disliked about the way the story was reported or covered. This encouraged participants to reflect how the news was reported in an open-ended way, allowing them to raise the points they felt were relevant without priming them.

Participants were finally enrolled in a behavioural change exercise which required participants to change their usual news behaviour. Those that were consuming considerable levels of BBC news content were asked to find alternative news sources for two days whilst those consuming other sources predominantly were asked to engage with BBC news for two days. The aim of the behavioural change task was to shine a light on habitual and unconscious motivations and behaviours. Changing behaviour encourages people to think about what they miss but also what they gain in making the change.

## Fieldwork

The first stage of extended focus group sessions, triads and first stage depth interviews were conducted across the UK from January to February 2022.

The reconvened depth interviews were then conducted between February and March 2022 .



The 'Number 10 Christmas party' story dominated the news at the start of the fieldwork period, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine taking place during the latter stage.

The overall fieldwork components are outlined below:

### 15 x online focus groups with general audiences:

- 15 x online focus groups – 6 respondents per group
- Across the UK including 3 in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland respectively
- Each group split by engagement with BBC (high, medium, low), SEG, life stage and political leanings (EU referendum in England and Wales, Scottish independence referendum, Unionist and Nationalist background in Northern Ireland)

**Online focus groups, triads, and depth interviews with** participants representing minority groups:

- 2 x Black and 2 x Muslim online focus groups, split by gender
- 1 x Jewish online focus group mixed gender
- 2 x LGB online focus groups split by gender
- 3 x youth triads with 16–17-year-olds, mixed gender
- 6 x depth interviews with trans respondents - 3 x trans women and 3 x trans men
- 10 x depth interviews with digitally excluded participants including 65-75 years old
- For all participants no quotas were set on BBC relationship which was left open

## 24 x reconvened depth interviews from across the sample:

- Participants were selected at random across the focus groups, triads and depth interviews from the first stage
- Interviews to enable more personal and individual exploration of relationship with BBC news and perceptions if due impartiality

Sample tables showing the detailed demographic information of each focus group, triad and depth interview have also been provided in the appendix.

The fieldwork was conducted across a range of urban and more rural locations as follows:

- England: 10 locations ( Birmingham, Bristol, Gillingham, Leeds, Liverpool and Warrington, London, Manchester, Oldham, South and Southeast, and York)
- Scotland: 4 locations (Dundee, Glasgow, Falkirk, Dumfries)
- Wales: 4 locations (Aberystwyth, Swansea, Wrexham, South Wales)
- Northern Ireland: 3 locations (Belfast, Ballymena, Derry/Londonderry)

The focus group in Wrexham was conducted as a pilot session to test the guide and stimuli before the approach was rolled out across the rest of the research.

## Stimuli

In preparation for the sessions, stimuli were developed in conjunction with Ofcom. Stimuli for the sessions included:

### **Stimulus material used:**

- A slide detailing a wide range of news brands
- A summarised definition of due impartiality taken from the Broadcasting Code (a summarised definition to make it easier for participants to understand)
- A summarised list of editorial techniques to preserve due impartiality taken from the Broadcasting Code
- Case studies of news and current affairs coverage of a range of news topics taken from the relatively recent news cycle

### **News and current affairs case studies:**

- Each case study contained short (around three-minute) excerpts of between three and five news reports or current affairs output on a given news story taken from the recent news cycle

- Case studies consisted of at least 1 x BBC and then other broadcasters represented including ITV, Sky, Channel 4, Channel 5, GB News, LBC, Talk Radio and a range of online news sources
- Each case study was shared between two and three times across the sample
- Each case study taken from recent news cycle and the context of the reporting was read out before showing reports
- In the interests of time each example included was an edited excerpt – this was explained to respondents before sharing the content
- Groups were shown two case studies on average

Stimuli were tailored to each nation to reflect nation-specific brand and news content.

### **Stimulus Material**

Ofcom stimulus material definition of due impartiality summarised from the Broadcasting Code:

#### **Due impartiality**

Not favouring one side or another, but it does not mean that news and current affairs providers must give an equal amount of time to every view. Instead, news and current affairs providers are meant to be unbiased trusted sources of news in how they present different viewpoints—challenging, probing, testing alternatives as appropriate as well as providing context to help inform viewers. This approach applies to News and can apply to most current affairs as well.

#### ***Different editorial techniques to preserve due impartiality***

- News and current affairs providers present the news in different ways using different editorial techniques to preserve due impartiality – these can include:
  - Seeking alternative viewpoints from a range of sources
  - Summarising the alternative viewpoints, for example, through interviewees expressing alternative views
  - Reading out a statement from the Government/individual/organisation/group in question and/or making clear that a broadcaster has sought alternative views
  - Ensuring that the views expressed in a news item are challenged critically by presenters and reporters
  - Interviews with members of the public expressing their views
  - Broadcasting different viewpoints on an issue on successive days in a series of explicitly linked reports
  - Presenting expert analysis through specialist editors or journalists

## Sample

Below is an overview of the sample structure.

### Sample - News and BBC engagement criteria

Groups were recruited to ensure a range of News engagement by setting the following participant quotas:

- All to be 'somewhat' interested in news as a minimum threshold
- Mix of types of news engaged with – minimum quotas set by genre of news
- All to engaged in news at least a few days a week

Participants were required to be consuming the news using a range of devices including smartphone, tablets, laptops, radios, and TV.

Across the 15 general audience focus groups we also recruited a mix of BBC relationships based on their engagement levels with BBC news. We defined these as:

- **Lower BBC engagement:** using non-BBC providers of news 'at least most days' or 'a few times a week' ensuring a spread of different news brands
- **Medium BBC engagement:** not using any BBC sources 'at least most days' but using any BBC source 'a few times a week' and also using at least one other source 'at least most days' or 'a few times a week'
- **Higher BBC engagement:** using at least two sources of BBC news 'at least most days' or 'a few times a week'

In the remainder of the sample, the engagement level with BBC news was left 'open' and fell out naturally.

In each of the focus group sessions there was a mix of gender.

## Sample tables

Session	Nation	Quotas	Gender	BBC news relationship	Location	No. of Participants
G1	Wales	Age 45-59 C1C2 Leave	Mix	Lower	Wrexham	6
G6	NI	Age 18-24 C1C2	Mix	Medium	Belfast	6
G7	Scotland	Age 25-34 C1C2 Yes Independence	Mix	Lower	Dundee	6
G11	England	Age 45-59 C2DE Leave	Mix	Lower	Gillingham	6
G12	England	Age 18-24 C1C2	Mix	Medium	Leeds (Suburb)	6
G13	England	Age 35-44 C2DE Leave	Mix	Lower	Birmingham	6
G14	England	Age 25-34 ABC1 Remain	Mix	Higher	York (Rural)	6
<b>MG1 Ethnic minority &amp; Faith groups</b>	England	Age 20-35 C2DE Black (Afro-Caribbean)	Male	Open	London	5
<b>T2 Youth</b>	Scotland	Age 16-17 C1C2	Mix	Open	Central Scotland	3
G10	England	Age 35-44 ABC1 Remain	Mix	Higher	London	6

<b>D3 non digital</b>	England	Age 65-75 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Manchester	1
<b>D8 non digital</b>	Wales	Age 35-44 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Open	1
<b>MG2 Ethnic minority &amp; Faith groups</b>	England	Age 30-45 C1C2 Black (Black African)	Femal e	Open	Bristol	5
<b>D13 Trans woman</b>	N/A	Trans depth	Trans	Open	Open	1
<b>D5 non digital</b>	Scotland	Age 65-75 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Falkirk	1
<b>D10 non digital</b>	NI	Age 60-64 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Open	1
<b>D15 Trans male</b>	N/A	Trans depth	Trans	Open	Open	1
<b>MG7 LGB</b>	N/A	Age 40-55 ABC1 LGB	Male	Open	Open	5
<b>G5</b>	NI	Age 60+ ABC1 Unionist skew	Mix	Higher	Ballymena	6
<b>G8</b>	Scotland	Age 18-24 ABC1 Mixed	Mix	Higher	Glasgow (Suburb)	6
<b>G15</b>	England	Age 60+ C1C2 Leave	Mix	Lower	Liverpool/ Warrington (Rural)	6

<b>T1 Youth</b>	England	Age 16-17 BC1	Mix	Open	South/ South-East	3
<b>D11 Trans woman</b>	N/A	Trans depth	Trans	Open	Open	1
<b>D16 Trans woman</b>	N/A	Trans depth	Trans	Open	Open	1
<b>D4 non digital</b>	England	Age 65-75 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Kent	1
<b>D9 non digital</b>	NI	Age 45-59 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Open	1
<b>D14 Trans man</b>	N/A	Trans depth	Trans	Open	Open	1
<b>G4</b>	NI	Age 35-44 C2DE Nationalist skew	Mix	Lower	Derry (Rural)	6
<b>MG4 Ethnic minority &amp; Faith groups</b>	England	Age 30-55 C1C2 Muslim	Femal e	Open	Oldham	5
<b>MG6 LGB</b>	N/A	Age 25-40 C1C2 LGB	Femal e	Open	Open	5
<b>G2</b>	Wales	Age 25-34 C2DE Remain	Mix	Medium	Swansea	6
<b>G3</b>	Wales	Age 60+ ABC1 Remain	Mix	Higher	Aberystwyth	6

<b>T3 Youth</b>	Wales	Age 16-17 C2DE	Mix	Open	South Wales	3
<b>D1 non digital</b>	England	Age 65-75 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Manchester	1
<b>D6 non digital</b>	Scotland	Age 18-24 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Falkirk	1
<b>D2 non digital</b>	England	Age 65-75 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Manchester	1
<b>D7 non digital</b>	Wales	Age 25-34 Digitally excluded depth	Mix	Open	Open	1
<b>MG3 Ethnic minority &amp; Faith groups</b>	England	Age 25-45 C1C2 Muslim	Male	Open	Oldham	5
<b>G9</b>	Scotland	Age 45-59 C2DE No Independence	Mix	Medium	Dumfries	6
<b>MG5 Ethnic minority &amp; Faith groups</b>	England	Age 35-55 Jewish	Mix	Open	London	5
<b>D12 Trans woman</b>	N/A	Trans depth	Trans	Open	Open	1

## Research Locations

### England

- Birmingham
- Bristol
- Gillingham
- Leeds (suburbs)
- Liverpool & Warrington (rural)
- London
- Manchester
- Oldham
- South/South-East
- York (rural surroundings)

### Scotland

- Dumfries
- Dundee
- Falkirk
- Glasgow (suburbs)

### Wales

- Aberystwyth
- South Wales
- Swansea
- Wrexham

### Northern Ireland

- Ballymena
- Belfast
- Derry (rural)



## Pre-Task

### Ofcom – BBC and Perceptions of Due Impartiality Research

#### Introductory paragraph

We are conducting a study looking at the different ways people keep up with the news and how you feel about the way that the news is presented and reported.

We are aware that news can come from many different sources and in lots of different forms, it can be newspapers and TV news but also when scrolling through social media using websites and apps, having the radio on and so forth. We are interested in hearing about what you think about **all of the different forms** of news you may experience in your daily life.

In your answers we would be very grateful if you could please give as much detail as possible.

## Day 1: Task 1: Usage and attitude (for all respondents at start of process)

*Please Note: this task is to get a sense of what role the news plays, their perceptions of their preferred sources and how well their needs are met. We will collate this information for each group prior to the start of each session.*

- a) When you think of the news what are the first few words that spring to mind?
- b) How important is the news to you, on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not at all important and 10 is extremely important? **Please tell us why you say that?**
- c) How would you describe what you need from the news, what are the most important things for you personally when you engage with the news?
- d) What are the sorts of news stories that interest you the most and why?
  - Give some examples of stories that you find informative or interesting?
- e) What are your **main** sources of news? Please write in both the news source plus what platform, so whether via print, website, app, TV news, radio, social media?
- f) Which is your **preferred** source of news?
  - What do you like about the way they report the news?
  - Can you give some examples of things you like?
- g) Which news sources do you dislike or would avoid using?
  - What are the things that you don't like about the way they report the news?
  - Can you give some examples of any dislikes or negatives about these sources?

## Day 2&3: Task 2 News Journal

*Please Note: the journal aims to prompt reflection on the specific news stories that respondents engage with or come across, with a focus on the way the story was presented and reported*

Over the next few days, we would like you to tell us a bit about the news you engage with by answering a small number of questions at the end of each day.

- What news sources did you use today? Please write in both the news source plus what platform, so whether via website, app, TV news, radio, social media?
- What specific news stories did you notice or engage with?

*Choose at least two of the stories you engaged with today and please answer the following questions (if you want to choose more than two stories please do so):*

- What made you notice or engage with this story today?

- **Thinking about the way the story was presented and reported, rather than how you feel about the story itself**
  - What did you like about the way it was reported and presented?
    - Please describe what you liked and why
  - Was there anything you didn't like about the way it was reported?
    - Please describe what you didn't like and why
  - Was there anything that surprised you about the way the story was reported?
    - Please describe what and why
  - What would you change or improve about the way it was reported to make it more engaging or informative for you?
    - Please tell us why you would make these changes.

#### Day 4: Task 3 Response to 2-3 x news reports stimulus material

*Please Note: this task aims to get the respondent to engage with specific news stories and elicit their initial responses – the idea is this can be completed at some point over the next few days in parallel with Task 2B*

We want to show you three news reports and get your reactions and thoughts on each of them. Please note some of the stories may be recent, some may be older.

**The main thing we want you to focus on is what you think about the way the story was reported rather than how you feel about the story itself**

- Thinking about the way the story was reported on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is poorly reported and 10 is very well reported how well do you feel this story was reported?

1 – **Poorly reported**    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10 – **Very well reported**



- a) IF RATE 6-10 Please tell us why you said that - what was it about the way it was reported that you liked?
  - Please tell us why in as much detail as possible, including any specific elements of the reporting that made you feel like this

- b) IF RATE 1-5: What didn't you like about the way it was reported?
  - Please tell us why in as much detail as possible, including any specific elements of the reporting that made you feel like this
- c) What would you change or improve about the way it was reported to make it more engaging or informative for you?
  - Please tell us why you would make these changes

#### Day 5: Task 4 Behaviour Change Deprivation

- *For low BBC engaged groups – directing them to stop using their preferred sources and use BBC sources instead*
- *For high BBC engaged groups – directing them to stop using all BBC sources and seek out alternative non-BBC sources*
- *For medium BBC engaged groups – directing them to stop using their preferred source and seek out alternative sources*

#### General Instructions (will reflect the above specification)

- We often don't fully appreciate why we value something until we try to do without it, so for the next 24 hours - please do without your preferred source of news
- So, for example, if you access BBC news at 10, please stop using **ANY BBC** sources of news whether TV, radio or online
- Or if you read a newspaper, please do not access that newspaper in any version whether print or online
- Please do your best to stop using your most frequently used news sources in any way for the whole of the next 24 hours
- During this time, please seek out alternatives for getting the news – it is really important that you do this rather than just stop keeping up with the news altogether as we are keen to understand how these alternative sources compare to your preferred source
- Once you have done this, please answer the questions below about the experience.

## Feedback on task

- Please tell us how you found the experience of doing without your preferred news source and using alternatives:
  - What source(s) did you do without?
  - How did you find the experience?
  - Please describe what you missed most about how your preferred news source reports the news?
  - What alternative sources did you use and why? *(Please include how you accessed the sources i.e., whether it was online, on the TV, radio or in print)*
  - How did the alternative compare with your usual preferred source in the way it reported the news? What did you feel they did better and worse?
  - What differences did you notice in the quality of the news reporting? Please give examples where possible.
- **Thank you for taking the time to complete these tasks, your help is extremely valuable. We will be reviewing all your responses with interest and look forward to meeting you in the group discussion.**

## Discussion guide

### Ofcom: BBC and perceptions of Due Impartiality Discussion Guide

#### Discussion Guide Overview 120 minutes

SECTION	PURPOSE	TIMING
<b>General Introduction</b>	Overall welcome the group and outline agenda	5 mins
<b>Respondent introduction and exploring stories they engaged with</b>	Getting sense of stories that interested respondents and why	10 mins
<b>Exploring context of news needs</b>	Exploring news needs, preferences, and perceptions of quality to set context	15 mins
<b>Perceptions of different news sources including BBC</b>	Evaluating BBC and other news sources in meeting needs	25 mins

<b>Exploring the concept of due impartiality, and initial evaluation of sources</b>	Eliciting instinctive/intuitive definitions of due impartiality, value, reactions to definition, and initial evaluation of sources	20 mins
<b>Case studies: Using stimulus to explore perceptions of due impartiality via reporting</b>	Using stimulus material of news reports to extend discussion of due impartiality comparing BBC and other sources	45 mins

## THANK AND CLOSE

### Primary Objectives

Primarily the qualitative research will help Ofcom understand

- How effectively the BBC is serving all audiences in its news and current affairs provision, across all platforms.
- How well audiences, with different levels of engagement, perceive the BBC as performing in terms of informing audiences about complex and challenging news and current affairs stories across its TV, radio, and online platforms.
- Views about the roles of due impartiality and trust in BBC news and current affairs.
- Whether perceptions of due impartiality among some groups are still driven by factors other than its news content, as was the case in 2019, as well as the content itself.

### Introducing the session (5 min)

- Welcome
- Topic of discussion – we would like to talk to you about news reporting, presentation, and coverage, what your needs are, what you value from news reporting, and how different news sources perform in meeting your needs
- Nature of the session – this is a 2-hour conversation that will involve stimulus to look at and talk about. This will include some written information and also some news reports to react to.
- Confidentiality of personal details/MRS code-of-conduct
- Video recording and viewing – why, uses, and remind permission obtained. Explain if viewers
- Reminder of confidential nature of research

### Respondent introductions and stories they engaged with (10 mins)

- Which stories were you following in the news when you did the homework task?
- Why were you drawn to those stories?
- How were you following them? Which news sources did you use and why those sources?

What did you think about the way the story was presented or reported?

### Exploring context of news needs (15 mins)

#### ***Role and importance in own life and society***

- You said the news was x level of **importance to you**, tell us more about what is behind that?
- If you had to describe the role and value news has in your life **personally**, what would you say?
- What about **'current affairs'** how important is this to you?

#### ***News needs and interests and how they are met***

- In the homework you have told us about your key needs from the news
- How would you describe **what is important to you personally** when you engage with the news?

#### ***Preferred sources***

- We know that XXX are your preferred sources of news, why are they your 'go to' sources?
- What do they do well that makes you use them more than others? Can you give some examples?

#### ***Summing up what does 'good quality' news look like***

- What makes up 'good quality' news reporting and coverage to you?
- What does 'bad quality' news reporting and coverage mean to you?

## Exploring perceptions of different sources of news (25 mins)

### Stimulus 1 news brands and logos

- Show logos of different news sources on a slide
- Word association...
  - What **words come to mind** when you think about this brand/source of news?
  - What words **describe their style** of news presenting and reporting the news?
- What are they **good at doing**? What is their reputation?
- How much **do you trust** these different sources? Why?

### Focus on BBC news

- Tell us about what words you **associate with BBC news** and current affairs output? Why do you have that perception?
- What are the main **strengths of BBC news**? How are they different from other providers?
  - How do you use BBC news? What for and why?
    - When are they a 'go to' (and for what)?
    - Which platforms do you seek out/come across BBC news most – Why?
- **For Nations** – what about their coverage of Nations news – so (as appropriate) BBC Newsline (NI) Reporting Scotland, BBC Wales today – what do you think of this service?
  - How do you feel about their Nations coverage versus UK national news?
  - How relevant does the BBC UK News feel to you?
  - How does it compare to other Nations news you may be engaging with?
- How does the BBC **compare against the 'good quality'** news criteria you described earlier?
- What is it about the BBC news on each platform that gives you this impression?
- What about its **reputation for 'types' of news**? How does the BBC (and each platform) compare?
- How does it **compare with the other sources** we have just talked about? If anything, what makes BBC more **different or distinct**?
- Do you feel the BBC gives you what you want in terms of news? Why?
- And how well does the BBC's **Current Affairs** give you what you want (compared to other broadcasters)?
- How **well do you feel BBC delivers** in terms of *"helps me understand and form opinions on what is going on in the UK and across the world today"*
- How well does the BBC deliver **complex and challenging stories** – again, explore answers and evidence for this?

- How much do you **trust BBC news compared to other** sources and why/why not?
- What do you think they **don't do well**? What do other providers do better?
  - Is there anything you think BBC news & current affairs should be doing more of?
  - Is there anything you think BBC news & current affairs should be focussing less on?

### Exploring due impartiality (20 mins)

#### *Exploring instinctive and intuitive definitions*

- We want to explore the meaning of a particular word and phrase in relation to news and current affairs – it's not a test. We just want to explore how you might interpret the term

#### *Stimulus 2 term 'due impartiality' on a slide*

- Just think about and jot down **what that word means** in news – duly impartial news is what?
- How **important is due impartiality** in the news and current affairs to you personally?
- Has anyone heard of the term 'Due impartiality' at all?
  - (Very briefly see if anyone has heard of/has any reaction to this before bringing in definition but no need to dwell on it)

#### *Reactions to formal definition*

- We now just want to look at a definition of the phrase 'due impartiality' and get your reactions
- The definition reflects the Broadcasting Code with which all TV and radio broadcasting news content has to comply

### *Stimulus 3 definition of due impartiality*

#### **Due impartiality**

Not favouring one side or another, but it does not mean that news & current affairs providers must give an equal amount of time to every view. Instead, news and current affairs providers are meant to be unbiased trusted sources of news in how they present different viewpoints—challenging, probing, testing alternatives as appropriate as well as providing context to help inform viewers. This approach applies to news and can apply to most current affairs as well.

- Does the explanation change your views about due impartiality?
  - What types of stories or topics do you think need time given to alternative views or arguments?

### *Stimulus 4 Different editorial techniques to preserve due impartiality*

- News and current affairs providers present the news in different ways using different editorial techniques to preserve due impartiality – these can include:
  - Seeking alternative viewpoints from a range of sources
  - Summarising the alternative viewpoints, for example, through interviewees expressing alternative views
  - Reading out a statement from the Government / individual / organisation / group in question and/or making clear that a broadcaster has sought alternative views
  - Ensuring that the views expressed in a news item are challenged critically by presenters and reporters
  - Interviews with members of the public expressing their views
  - Broadcasting different viewpoints on an issue on successive days in a series of explicitly linked reports
  - Presenting expert analysis through specialist editors or journalists
  - How do you feel about this list of techniques as a means of ensuring duly impartial reporting
  - Which do you like to see in the news, where are you not so keen
  - What types of stories or topics do you think need time given to alternative views or arguments?

**MODERATOR EXPLAIN:** For the purposes of this discussion, we are more interested in the extent to which you feel the requirements of ‘due impartiality’ are followed in the news and current affairs and what it is specifically about the way different points of view are presented that gives you that impression.

### ***BBC and due impartiality***

- Based on your own understanding of what make something duly impartial, would you say that BBC news & current affairs coverage is duly **impartial**?
- Can you give examples of **where BBC news is and isn't seen** as duly impartial?
- So, thinking about the **different editorial techniques for preserving due impartiality** (REFER TO STIMULUS 4 AGAIN)
- How do you feel the BBC does across these different techniques? For example
  - Seeking alternative viewpoints from a range of sources....
  - Ensuring that the views expressed in a news item are challenged critically by presenters....
  - Broadcasting different viewpoints on a particular issue....

### ***Explore current affairs***

- Re-explain BBC also has a range of current affairs programmes such as – *Question Time*, *Panorama* for example
- How duly impartial do you think these programmes are? Why do you say this?
- Do you feel the approach needs to be the same as the news or can it be different? Why?
- There are intended to be some key differences between current affairs programmes and news – these include:
  - News programmes will typically be discussing the most up to date developments on issues in the form of short news items.
  - Unlike in news programmes, presenters can express their personal views on the issues being discussed
- How do you feel about these differences?
- Based on this description, how duly impartial do you feel BBC current affairs programmes are?
  - How do you judge whether a show like *Question Time* or *Panorama* is being duly impartial?
  - Given that presenters are able to express their views what needs to happen to ensure they still feel duly impartial?

### ***Thinking about different sources (compared to the BBC)***

- Thinking about due impartiality - **do some news sources come across as better** at achieving due impartiality than others? If so which ones?
- Do you feel any of them are better at some of the editorial techniques we talked about e.g.
  - Seeking alternative viewpoints from a range of sources....

- Ensuring that the views expressed in a news item are challenged critically by presenters....
- Broadcasting different viewpoints on a particular issue....
- How would you **make up your mind whether a news source is duly impartial** or not?
- What do you see as the **most duly impartial news** sources?
- What are the **least duly impartial news** sources?

### Case studies (45 mins – note expected play time 15-20 minutes overall)

Rotate order of clips shown in each case study per group

*Note: Main focus will be on BBC content – and how this compares to competitor content*

- We now want to show some examples of different news reports from different news sources and get your impressions on how they perform in terms of due impartiality. The examples we show will be around a common news topic or theme
  - MODERATOR TO EXPLAIN: The clips we will show – **are not the full report** but have been edited and shortened for the purposes of this research. So, you will only be seeing part of the report not the full version
  - And as we discussed earlier there are a range of editorial techniques to reflect different viewpoints (i.e., to preserve due impartiality) and we are going to show some different examples here.
  - So, as we discussed news and current affairs providers present the news in different ways using different **editorial techniques to preserve due impartiality**
- The clips that we will show you may be examples of these different editorial techniques
- We will play each clip in turn and get you to jot down a few impressions before moving onto the next and then compare and contrast the different reports and how you judged them

PLAY EACH CLIP WITHIN A CASESTUDY. AFTER EACH CLIP BRIEFLY EXPLORE IMPRESSIONS OF THE DUE IMPARTIALITY OF THE NEWS SOURCE

NOTE; Introduce each clip as ‘news’ or ‘current affairs’ **explore perceptions of due impartiality probing on:**

- How duly **impartial** do you feel the report is – do you think it has reflected an appropriate range of viewpoints?

- Why do you say that? **What is it about the way it is reported** that is telling you that? What specific aspects signal to you whether the report make it feel (or not feel) like duly impartial reporting?
- How **typical is this of the way the BBC** usually reports stories like this? Why do you say that?

AFTER EACH CASE STUDY HAS BEEN SHOWN:

- How does the BBC's coverage of this story **compare with other** providers?
- Thinking about how duly impartial the reporting you have seen tonight and looked at previously - what are the BBC **doing well vs. less well**?
- What about for **current affairs programming**, based on what we have been discussing tonight, what do you feel the BBC are **doing well vs. less well** here?

**Thank you and close**