

# Reporting uncertain news: how the BBC can do better

Much of news on TV, newspapers, and on the internet is uncertain information. This is something that journalists deal with poorly. The BBC is no different to others and, in some ways, it can be worse.

This article includes a detailed itemisation of bad reporting practices on BBC news and current affairs programmes on TV and on the BBC news website, some discussion of why they appear, and recommendations for improved practice.

Along the way there are many fictional illustrations and some real examples. I have tried to select these to be balanced and the point of including them is purely to explain the issues about news reporting.

On a number of points I present no evidence to support my claims that the faults happen or that that they are common. My sense that they are common is based on the fact that, whenever I watch BBC news, I notice faults – often several in a single broadcast.

I have not tried to survey, systematically, the frequency of these bad practices because it would be very time consuming to do it rigorously and watching BBC news is annoying, especially once you are aware of its flaws. However, if you read my list of bad practices and try spotting

them yourself you might be able to develop your own views about how common the practices are.

## Uncertain importance

The importance of information that the BBC (or any news reporter) could include in its output is usually uncertain. Even when the facts of an event are clear (e.g. annual production of photovoltaic cells) the importance of that information often remains uncertain.

In this situation, deciding what to report, and what angle to focus on with each story, is difficult and more vulnerable to bias and selection on the basis of what is easy and familiar.

Here are some problem behaviours shown by the BBC that are mostly driven by convenience and familiarity.

## Convenient choices

**Political Machine:** News organizations tend to have reporters permanently in place to report on politics, sport, and some other topics. This they do, endlessly and efficiently, even when the stories are not very important. This is at the expense of other stories that are not covered at all, or are covered rarely.

One of the most important issues for humankind today is the pace of development and implementation of solar power technology. Every reduction in the cost of solar power is an exciting development because it is already the cheapest energy option in many parts of the world and that footprint is expanding rapidly. This is a key topic for the future of our species and others, and yet reporting on this topic is next to zero by the BBC.

Overall, the BBC's news output, especially on television, features too much politics at the expense of many other areas of news that affect people more (technology, new products/services, health issues).

A better approach would surely be to establish some priorities based on sensible principles and quantitative data. How many people are affected? How seriously? Where are they (because home news should be somewhat higher priority)? As a result we might see more coverage of genuinely important issues and less coverage of political trivia about perceptions and opinions. Genuine poverty in an absolute sense would be more important than inequality. Death would be more important than feeling bad. Large scale waste and pollution would be more important than who won an Oscar and what they said about President Trump when they received it.

**Reporting Rhetoric as News:** Some BBC lead stories are about something insignificant said by a political party leader or another prominent politician. The statement is not an announcement of a plan or allocation of resources; it's just a sound bite.

Quite often, the statement is one that has not yet been made, as in the often heard 'The Prime Minister will today say...' This type of item is based on briefings

provided by the government and usually features equally unimportant counter-rhetoric by figures from the other parties. In the end, all we are being told is that the parties hate each other and disagree on everything – which we already know.

These reports are at the expense of spending time reporting things that really matter.

Another version of this happens when some dramatic event causes loss of life. (Ordinary road deaths, hospital accidents, deaths from pollution, etc are not dramatic enough.)

In the event of a tragedy the political leaders are eager to come forward and make statements on camera expressing suitable sentiments. These statements then get reported as if they are important news.

Far more important at such times is to repeat any special telephone numbers being used by emergency services (e.g. to help reunite families) and repeat instructions given to the public by the emergency services (e.g. to avoid particular areas if possible).

**Stuck Needle:** This pattern of behaviour involves persistent repetition of themes and phrases from one report to the next, even though there are other points that could be made. For example: Brexit ~ uncertainty, EU deal ~ trouble ahead, child killed by parents ~ local government failure.

This is particularly noticeable in the final, throwaway 'but' line. For example, '...but whatever happens, the future looks uncertain.'

This kind of repetition is at the expense of more thoughtful and varied coverage of issues.

**Persistent Mis-framing:** The Stuck Needle is more damaging when it is

repeating a mis-framing of an issue, or at least a framing that is politically advantageous to some. For example, during Margaret Thatcher's time as Prime Minister the UK's workforce was expanding so that, although the number of people with formal jobs increased, so too did the number of people without formal jobs. The issue could be framed as 'growing workforce', 'rising employment', or 'rising unemployment'. Persistently framing the issue as rising unemployment tended to obscure the overall situation and favoured the opposition parties at that time.

More recently, the BBC's coverage of negotiations over Brexit between the EU and the UK has focused on the UK's contribution to poor progress and largely ignored the EU's contribution. This is despite the obvious issue that the EU is composed of many countries and so will almost certainly take longer to reach its final decision than the UK does. (By the time you read this, emerging events may have changed the BBC's focus.)

Persistent framing choices like this are one of the ways that the biases of BBC news people are expressed.

### Biased choices

Mediabiasfactcheck.com rates the BBC's bias as 'left-center' based on detailed analysis of wording and stories, cross checked against voting by visitors to the site. Similarly, News Watch has statistically documented consistent bias by the BBC on major themes, especially the EU, for nearly two decades. This does not necessarily mean that the corporation is deliberately controlled to achieve this effect, or that the bias is towards a particular political party. It could be a product of the individual biases of reporters on particular issues being predominantly one way. Complaints about BBC bias come from all political

viewpoints, suggesting that BBC bias is not completely consistent.

BBC journalist Andrew Marr wrote that the BBC is 'a publicly-funded urban organisation with an abnormally large proportion of younger people, of people in ethnic minorities and almost certainly of gay people, compared with the population at large' and that this 'creates an innate liberal bias inside the BBC.'

Former BBC business editor, Jeff Randall, considered himself a rare conservative in a liberal organization. He said 'It's a bit like walking into a Sunday meeting of the Flat Earth Society. As they discuss great issues of the day, they discuss them from the point of view that the earth is flat. If someone says, "No, no, no, the earth is round!", they think this person is an extremist. That's what it's like for someone with my right-of-centre views working inside the BBC.'

Perhaps a big reason for some of the apparent bias is that people who work in the public eye tend to focus on being popular, and many prefer to do so by appearing caring, particularly towards underdogs. Everyone can recognize caring behaviour and its related emotional displays. Not everyone can recognize fair and rational weighing of the conflicting interests of many people, insightful critical analysis, or meticulous planning. These more cerebral abilities are very desirable and *should* be popular when demonstrated, but not many people have them and not many can spot them. It is easier and more effective to look caring, which is the favourite choice at the BBC.

Former BBC presenter, Jeremy Paxman, in an interview with the Sunday Times, said 'Why is the story always about the disabled refugee from Syria, rather than the demands that the disabled refugee from Syria might make upon our

taxpayers? That's all too common. It's a metropolitan-elite problem, isn't it?'

In the case of the BBC there is one story preference in particular that any regular viewer will recognize.

**Equality Focus:** The pattern here is a preference for stories and angles on stories that focus on equality.

When Donald Trump ran for President the BBC was generally negative about him and had a choice of negative stories to run. It could have covered his truthfulness, focusing especially on contradictions between things he had been recorded saying, and on his business dealings, especially Trump University, which appeared to be a fraud. Alternatively, it could have attacked his competence, focusing on how much money he had lost in some of his ventures and how much of his wealth was simply what was left of his inheritance. It could have focused on his poor treatment of people generally, not just women, but men too. Although all these themes received some coverage, the overwhelming theme day after day was equality, with stories about his treatment of women and views on immigration.

The ideal coverage for an organization aiming to damage Trump as much as possible would have been to present all these stories, accurately and factually, with no advocacy. What the BBC actually did focused on equality to the near exclusion of other themes. The Democrats did the same. This allowed Trump to shrug off what are, legally, more serious charges about his honesty, and to brush away evidence of incompetence. In addition, the relentless criticism of him on equality grounds was seen by his supporters as 'political correctness' by biased 'lefties' and may even have helped Trump.

It was extraordinary that a billionaire with a love of luxury, who has made his money from luxury, should successfully position himself as a saviour of the American poor. He did it with the help of his political opponents.

Another example of counter-productive focus on equality concerns BBC pay.

When the pay of famous BBC people was disclosed in July 2017 for the first time the issues the BBC reporting focused on were that (a) the amounts were large, so larger than most people get paid, and (b) men tended to be paid more than women. Both these are equality issues.

It might instead have focused on incompetence and the waste of public funds on people who do not need them. It could have asked whether BBC managers who agreed these amounts were competent (because the highest paid people did not seem to be great assets), or what the BBC could do instead with the money wasted on people whose skill is just to read what is on the screen in front of them.

Or it could have focused on the hypocrisy of an organization that constantly goes on about equality in its output paying people vastly different amounts to do very similar or exactly the same simple work.

Since the tendency for most people is towards thinking too narrowly and missing some, or even many, of the issues arising from a development, the duty for a reporter is to help viewers by thinking widely about the issues and bringing out angles that many will have missed.

By too often picking its favourite issues the BBC fails to fulfil this public service role.

The suggestion above about developing a reasonable set of priorities using data would help here.

Another of the BBC's consistent preferences is probably shared with most other news media.

**Negative Focus:** This pattern is simply focusing reporting on bad things that have happened or might happen. Stories and angles selected tend to concern bad stuff. That includes reporting on an issue while there is a problem but then not returning to report on the solution to that problem. It includes reporting on a story when the truth is unclear and there is controversy but not reporting when the truth emerges and turns out *not* to be one of the possibilities that was causing so much concern earlier. It includes taking a story where many people involved are happy with the outcome achieved but one party is not, and focusing on those who are unhappy, regardless of whether they have a good reason for complaining.

In science journal publishing there is a problem called 'positive reporting bias', which is the tendency to report the results of studies only when they show some interesting effect, and not when they fail to show the effect. Overall, this has biased the literature on many issues, especially in some sciences<sup>1</sup>.

Something similar but reversed almost certainly happens in news reporting because of its focus on *negative* news.

Thanks to this negative focus:

- a government that holds overall public spending constant will seem to be making cuts overall;
- a government that is making more good decisions than bad ones, and solving problems competently when

they arise, will seem to be incompetent and ineffective;

- a police force that reduces crime overall will appear to be failing to deal with crime;
- a police force whose members are far more law abiding on average than other citizens will be presented as corrupt; and
- a population that is getting healthier and more long-lived overall will seem to be getting sicker.

A fairer presentation of our modern world would be achieved if this negative focus was replaced with objectively driven coverage.

**Storm in a Teacup:** If a story has the right qualities it can generate a lot of attention even if it is not important. Often, the presentation of such stories is tightly focused on a few points and lacks essential context. Without that context any facts included can be harder to interpret.

News coverage should be based on priorities established by sensible principles and, to a large extent, on quantitative analysis. I have not done such an analysis but would not be surprised if one showed that, for example, a leading medical researcher taking a week off work with a cough is more important to humanity than a celebrity having to apologize for a badly worded tweet.

One function of a responsible news reporting organization should be to educate its viewers and help them understand the important issues.

Establishing sound priorities and covering them systematically over time would help them do this. For example, one big issue for the UK at present is the government's debt. Whether you think taxes and public expenditure are too high or too low, and whether you think the debt is acceptable

<sup>1</sup> Various actions are now being taken to reduce this bias.

or not, it is hard to have an informed view unless you know some basic facts about the debt.

The government's debt is important because it means current taxpayers have to pay interest on the debt and because future taxpayers, including our children, will eventually have to pay back that debt. We are living now on favours that the next generation may well be asked to return.

The level of UK government debt is a major, newsworthy fact and should be reported and explained every time new information is available. The distinction between debt and deficit needs to be explained regularly to help viewers with these easily confusable words. The role of North Sea oil and gas revenues – their rise and now fall – should be made clear. The implications of interest payments, expressed as a per capita amount, should be mentioned. The significance of rising population for both government expenditure and tax revenues should be explained from time to time.

Without these points being clear it is hard to make sense of or evaluate arguments about public spending and taxation. You might think that the gap between what the government spends and receives should be closed with higher taxes, lower expenditure, or some other means. You might think that the debt and interest payments are acceptable, other things being considered. The point is that viewers need to understand the context clearly to have a sensible view.

Another example of an issue worth regular, systematic coverage would be the gradual reduction in tobacco smoking. This change is saving lives on a scale that dwarfs the impact of terrorism. Between 2007 and 2015 lives lost by heart disease alone due to smoking have reduced by more than 2,200 per year.

This is not to say that terrorism is unimportant. It is important, particularly as the scope for more terrorism seems great. However, it is showing that other issues less covered by the BBC are even more important.

Other threats to life more important than terrorism in terms of lives lost in the UK include reduced alcohol consumption, improved fire safety, improved road safety, and worsening air quality. Dog bites put far more people in hospital each year than terrorism in the UK, and between 2010 and 2015<sup>2</sup> more people died in England and Wales from dog attacks (21 deaths) than from terrorism (13 deaths)<sup>3</sup>.

Frequently reporting trivia (e.g. celebrity tweets, political rows) as if it is important implies to viewers that life in the UK is so comfortable that these really are the only issues left worth mentioning. From this we get a strange mixture of complacency, entitlement, and underlying frustration that our big problems are being ignored.

**Trying to Help:** Some of the BBC's most one-sided and least objective reports probably come from a desire to do good. Do these reports actually do good, as intended? Two common types come to mind.

The first type is a report that looks like a charity fund raiser for a suffering group. The focus is on the suffering of the group and the implied action for viewers is to 'give more'.

However, a charity donor's decision is not between giving nothing and giving to this month's most promoted victims. It is between a large set of alternative gifts to

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<sup>2</sup> Admittedly a quiet period for terrorism in the UK even by modern standards.

<sup>3</sup> Some breeds are more aggressive than others, for their size, but size is important. Dogs seem to be bullies as the riskiest combination is a big dog with a small child.

different organizations with different schemes to help different causes. The same is true for politicians deciding what to do with aid. They (should) want to be effective altruists, not just feel good about themselves. That decision requires much more than just a strong sense of the personal suffering of people involved. By focusing on suffering the BBC report fails to give other information that would help potential donors decide how to spend their donations. It is true that news reports can spark huge waves of giving, but even when this happens it is not necessarily giving to the right people, at the right time, to spend on the right things, with the right conditions attached.

The second type of report that has this motive is one that looks like an advertisement for diversity or multiculturalism. The implied action for viewers is to 'love each other'.

Promotional pieces on diversity and multiculturalism tend to gloss over practical issues to be overcome that are obvious to those directly affected. Perhaps the real need is for our society to arrange things so that it is much easier to 'love each other'. Doing that requires properly understanding the practical issues and addressing them. BBC reports that pretend there are no practical issues block real progress and antagonise people already suffering from those practical issues.

## Uncertain truths

It is easy for a reporter to tell viewers that a large building is on fire or that a bomb has gone off, or to give the result of a referendum. What is much more difficult is to report on matters that are not clearly established facts. For example, why did the building burn, who set off the bomb, and what will happen now that the referendum result is known?

Instead of reporting one truth, the reporter has to deal with multiple possible truths. That is potentially complex and requires more effort to be impartial.

## Focus on caring

In their drive to appear caring, especially towards underdogs, reporters prefer to operate according to some familiar patterns when an event occurs and blame is uncertain.

### **The Authorities are Always Wrong:**

This pattern involves choosing a potentially guilty party that is in authority in some way. The groups to come under pressure are, depending on the context, central government, local government, the police, hospital trusts, and so on. This can be despite there being an obvious main perpetrator (e.g. a crazy murderer with a knife) and despite obvious difficulties the authorities might face (e.g. preventing terrorist attacks that require no special weapons).

There are exceptions to this pattern. Big businesses are sometimes seen as even more blameworthy than government. For example, a story about British Gas raising its prices was pitched as mainly the company's fault, despite the company trying to hand the blame onto government. The idea is perhaps that big companies are callous, grasping, and run by rich men for rich men. In reality *some* companies are this way. For a company like British Gas, most of the money customers pay over is then paid out to suppliers and ordinary employees with only a small percentage going to the directors (even if they are overpaid), a small percentage going to shareholders (who may be the pension funds of ordinary people), and a small percentage going to the government as tax (largely spent on public services). The rest, again a small percentage, is kept to be spent on improving the business.

Another frequent exception is the European Union. Despite being the highest authority in Europe it is rare for BBC news people to assume this authority is in the wrong.

One problem arising from this pattern of routinely blaming an authority is that it slightly absolves the most guilty. If everything is the government's fault then the pressure is off the crooks, bullies, terrorists, scroungers, addicts, poor teachers, and anyone else who contributes in some way to society's problems. (That's just about all of us in some way, but to different extents.)

It would be better to be truly even-handed and acknowledge the guilt, or potential guilt, of all relevant parties, or none. Where this is complex the BBC could build up a map of the events and people involved on their website. This would catalogue actual and potential contributions to the outcomes. In brief TV reports viewers could be directed to the map for more information. The map could be improved rapidly over time.

### **Victim-Perpetrator/Oppressor**

**Stories:** When BBC news people perceive a person or group as victims there is a tendency to focus on positive points about the victims and avoid reporting points that are negative about them. A person or group perceived as responsible for the suffering of the victims is also reported differently, with a tendency to report negative points about them and avoid positive points.

For example, if a police officer is murdered in the line of duty then the officer is taken as a victim. For a few days at least the officer will be reported as a fine officer who was liked by everyone. To some extent the police force concerned will also be included in this halo, with their statements about the officer reported respectfully.

However, if a person dies shortly after being arrested by the police then the person who dies is taken as a victim. Again, the victim is reported in a wholly positive way. At the same time, the police involved are often presented so that they look at least suspicious if not outright dishonest and murderous.

Here are some pairs of people/groups that sometimes give rise to this kind of story. Consider how frequent you think Victim-Perpetrator/Oppressor framing is in these cases, who is taken as the victim, and how strongly the stories are framed:

- People killed in a terrorist attack and the terrorists
- Black people and white people
- Women and men
- Women and President Trump
- Mexicans and President Trump
- Christians/atheists and Muslims
- Nazis/neo-Nazis and anti-fascist groups
- Children and paedophiles
- The police and black people
- Residents and immigrants
- Immigrants and people who want the UK to leave the EU
- People living in the north of England and people living in the south of England
- Motorists and cyclists
- Swindlers and the people they have swindled

Why do BBC news people report differently when they perceive a victim-perpetrator situation? I speculate that some of the following potential explanations may be involved:

- *Understandable consideration for victims.* For example, some people who are swindled acted foolishly and were vulnerable in part because of their desire for easy money. It seems insensitive and impolite to mention



this in public just after they have lost so much and when somebody else is much more to blame.

- *Desire to appear caring.* As discussed earlier.
- *Fear of negative reactions.* These may come from inside and outside the BBC, and some groups have an established pattern of vigorous protest. It does not always matter if the protest is reasonable or not. If enough people seem upset enough, and if they are in the victim group or representing them, then the protest can be very damaging to a reporter or presenter and to the BBC overall. It is not enough for the report to be impartial, or even for it to be balanced. The protest may be triggered by any negative point or resented choice of words included in a report.
- *Halo effect.* A psychological theory that goes back to Thorndike in 1920 is that if we evaluate a person as good on one attribute then that also leads us to evaluate them as good on others. The statistical definition of this effect is tricky and it can be difficult or impossible to distinguish between rational use of real correlations between attributes and genuine bias.
- *Habit/established clichés.* These stories appear so frequently on the BBC that they may have become associated with clichéd points and even phrases. The reporter simply says what they always say, with just the names and dates changed.
- *Shortage of interviewees.* BBC news people are not the only ones who recognize that negative material about perceived victim groups can come across badly. Others are aware of the issues too. It may be hard to find interviewees willing to be seen making statements that may seem insensitive, especially on the BBC where such

statements would likely be put in a very negative light.

Another question that is difficult to answer on some occasions is why BBC news people choose some groups as victims and not others. Again, I can only speculate in suggesting these possible reasons:

- *When it's obvious.* For example, in the case of a deadly terrorist attack.
- *BBC convention.* In some cases the victim status of some groups is established convention within the BBC and no new decision making is involved.
- *Headline outcome measures.* These include incomes, wealth, and likelihood of being arrested. A group that earns less than another is more likely to be chosen as victim, even if this is an over-simplification of a complex situation. For example, average disposable income in the north of England is lower than in London, and yet the best places to live in the UK are outside London. (London property prices are a huge problem for many and air quality is poor.)
- *Historical bad treatment.* Groups that have been treated badly in the past – perhaps generations ago – sometimes continue to be seen as victims today.
- *Political ideology.* In some cases the victimhood of some groups is an established part of political ideologies and some BBC news people may be adherents to those ideologies. They may even have gone into journalism specifically to campaign for particular causes or groups.
- *Association.* When a person or group is part of a wider group with an established victim/perpetrator role then the wider classification can be inherited to some extent.

- *Overall wealth.* It is rare for wealthy people to be taken as victims, even when they are treated very badly.

These points do not explain why BBC news people sometimes do not see a Victim-Perpetrator/Oppressor situation even though those involved probably do. Here are some suggested pairs and, if you are a regular BBC news viewer, consider if these frequently come up and how strongly, if at all, BBC news people frame them as Victim-Perpetrator/Oppressor pairs:

- Poor self-employed people and UK tax authorities.
- Children exposed to parental cigarette smoke and the smoking parents.
- Children menaced or attacked by dogs in public places and the dogs and dog owners.
- Children whose life prospects are lowered by the behaviour of their parents, and those parents.
- People living near expanding airports and the various large organizations that want to expand the airports.
- Young people given poor careers advice at school and their careers advisors.
- People too tall to be comfortable on most seating, especially on public transport, and the various organizations that specify seating sizes.
- People who look a bit ugly even when they have tried hard to look their best and all the people who overvalue good looks.
- Shy introverts and sensation-seeking extraverts who control social occasions to suit themselves.
- People who buy things they don't need and the marketing industry.

The Victim-Perpetrator/Oppressor story pattern has some negative effects.

Once a group is established as victims (e.g. of a bombing, a fire, a flood) the pattern involves reporting no points that are negative about those people, such as failure to take obvious steps to reduce the loss they suffer, breaking the law, or making unreasonable demands for compensation.

Problems that might arise from this include providing an unbalanced view of events, encouraging victims to push for all they can get while they are protected from criticism, and annoying people who are losing out as the victims gain.

The bias itself can be aggravating to those groups criticised in a biased way. It also tends to associate groups that are commonly victims with bias, so that neutral observers may begin to view those victim groups in a negative way.

Some people within supposed victim groups do not see themselves as victims and do not like to be portrayed in that way. Some people within supposed victim groups say that their own group is a major cause of its poor outcomes. They argue against blaming those outcomes on others because it provides a convenient excuse.

In theory, it is possible for a reporter to think a report helps a victim group when in reality it harms that group.

Further damage may be done if the BBC's choice of victim and perpetrator/oppressor is incorrect or at least unfair. In principle, the impression given by headline outcome measures might be misleading. For example, low income might not be an indication of unfair treatment, but might in some cases be the result of low ability and effort, or lower cost of living. Historical bad treatment might not be relevant now, as indicated by changes since the bad treatment ended. Perhaps there are measures of wellbeing that have

worsened. Perhaps there are some groups that have made progress while others have slipped back.

The BBC might get the roles the wrong way around, or see the roles in situations where they don't exist, or may fail to see roles when they do exist.

The BBC should try to avoid unnecessary and inappropriate Victim-Perpetrator/Oppressor framing and present such stories in an impartial way, even if that sometimes leads to angry protest. The idea discussed above of building up maps of events on the BBC's news website to capture complex causality could help with this. The idea would be to present a fuller, more objective picture of who contributed to a success or failure, or who stands to gain or lose and why.

**Looking for Tears:** A reporter who looks at a population of people affected by an event and then makes a bee line for someone who is crying is Looking for Tears.

Bringing the camera in close to someone in tears intrudes on them, but also misleads the viewer. What about the people who are not crying? How many of them are there? It can also be hard to interpret tears where they are shed in a country where loud wailing is a socially expected way to express grief. UK people tend to cry quietly, but this does not mean they are less upset than those in other countries who are louder.

What matters most is not the tears but the facts of the hardship or loss suffered.

**Prodding for Tears:** If nobody is crying already then a reporter determined to focus on emotion has another option: conduct an interview and try to provoke tears.

Familiar phrases from this kind of interview include 'So how do you feel

when you ...?' and 'How hard has it been for you to...?' Having asked the question the reporter waits quietly until the interviewee provides the required verbal responses and, hopefully, those tears.

Most of us understand that when someone has been through a traumatic event or is in a difficult situation the last thing you should do is magnify the problems in their minds with this kind of leading question.

Most viewers will understand without help that a person who has suffered some kind of loss or is in a difficult situation may be unhappy about it. It is obvious. What is less obvious and more educational for viewers is to learn what the unfortunate person is doing to alleviate their situation.

So, instead of 'How hard has it been...?' how about asking 'What have you been able to do so far to recover?'

In the hours after the Grenfell Tower fire caused scores of deaths the BBC's reporters focused on bringing viewers the harrowing details. This including filming interviews with onlookers describing desperation and deaths they had seen.

In addition to upsetting eye witnesses by asking them to retell the story, this risked causing upset and stress for viewers, especially those with pre-existing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is a psychological condition caused by being involved in a very traumatic situation and is common among emergency services workers. Although most people do not get PTSD from any given traumatic experience, people who are exposed to many traumatic experiences are more likely to suffer from it. One of the symptoms that can be experienced is anxiety, especially when reminded of the dangers of life.

**Vague Emotional Quotations:** When an official report of some kind is published it will usually contain some factual details and some fact-free summary statements. To use Vague Emotional Quotations the reporter just selects the most damning or emotionally charged phrases from the non-factual summary material and leaves out the facts. The rest of the report might be fleshed out with the usual clichés, including 'damning report', 'catalogue of failures', and 'questions to answer.'

It would be better to avoid those clichés and pick out the most important facts from the report so that viewers learn something useful instead of just shocking or worrying.

### Convenient reliance on opinions

The BBC has extensive, published Editorial Guidelines for news reporting. At the heart of these are its Editorial Values. All this material reads very well, and it is only by viewing the output of the BBC that one realises the reality of its approach to news reporting.

**Balanced Opinions Only:** In a classic Balanced Opinions Only report the content consists purely of opinions (or spin) from various parties who disagree with each other or are in some kind of negotiation or other power struggle. Facts are few and there is no independent critical analysis or other value-adding journalistic work. This approach is common for stories with controversial aspects, and is consistent with the Editorial Guidelines for such topics, which require a range of *opinions* but say only that facts should be true *if* included by the BBC reporter/presenter. (So, the easiest approach is to avoid including facts that would have to be checked.)

**Failure to Analyse:** The corollary of a Balanced Opinions Only report is Failure to Analyse. This is simply covering a story without performing even the simplest and most obvious analysis of readily available information.

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines require effort to get to the truth, but in practice the effort made is often very slight.

In the 2017 UK general election the Labour party issued a manifesto with what it described as 'fully costed' policies. (Its main opponent, the Conservative Party, put no costs on its policies at all.) This was important to the Labour party because many UK voters fear that Labour, if returned to power, would raise taxes, still spend more money than it raises, and increase the government's borrowing considerably. Since government borrowing is already rather high for peacetime and this dates back to at least the last Labour government this is a significant and legitimate concern.

What does 'fully costed' mean? The document they produced had a list of proposals that would cost the government money and a list of tax increases and other ways to raise more money. The two lists add up to about the same amount of money and there was even a small safety margin.

A few minutes of thought reveals the following obvious issues worthy of exploring in news reporting:

- Since the government at that time was spending more than it raised each year (the infamous 'deficit'), Labour's balanced lists did not show that their government would live within its means (still less start paying back its debts). Instead, the numbers just said that government debt would continue to rise at the existing speed.
- Some expenditure was classified as 'capital' expenditure and so not

counted when the lists of income and expenditure were compared.

However, these 'capital' expenditures would still have added to government debt.

- The lists just showed the impact for 2021/22, not the impact over, say, a new Labour government's first term of office. What would the impact be for overall government debt and interest payments over five years? What about one-off costs prior to 2021/22?
- The individual numbers against items in the list had no breakdown and some of the tax income in particular seemed speculative. What data and assumptions were used to produce them? Why would 'Efficiency review of corporate tax reliefs' raise money when it sounds like a costly project, not a tax change? How did they know how much those savings would be when the efficiency review was still to be done?

As an ex-auditor I would say that these were obvious points and that raising them would not have been a matter of opinion or a political act. (The Conservative Party manifesto did not attempt costing at all, which should also have been a reason for investigation.) Auditing financial statements is all about deciding if numbers give a fair presentation and these points are obvious threats to that, deserving further investigation.

If Labour's statement was the starting point for an audit I would say that there is a chance the statement had been designed to deceive people who forget about the deficit, are confused by the talk of 'capital' expenditures, do not know that standard practice for accountants is to model future years, not just one year, and who tend to think a number in a printed document must be correct.

If I can spot these potential issues in 10 minutes of casual browsing why not the BBC?

Another striking example was reporting on worsening performance of Accident & Emergency departments in the winter of 2016/2017. The BBC focused on a small set of possible explanations of the problem for days, even though a report by the National Audit Office had already been published that examined the issues in detail and covered many more drivers of the problem, with extensive quantitative analysis.

Reporters should also be analysts. They should critically analyse information and use that thinking to direct their investigations and questions in interviews. Some preparation is, of course, normal even for the BBC, but often superficial compared to what is easily achievable.

**Minimal Samples:** Reporters like to interview people in the street or at their workplace. They will ask them how they have been or would be affected by something (e.g. a budget), if they know about something (e.g. a law change), or what their opinion is on some topical issue (e.g. Brexit). The reporter then shows between one and six such mini-interviews in their report to show what people are thinking.

This seems like a good thing to do but a big problem is the tiny sample size. There is very little chance that a sample so small will be representative of the whole population. For that you need a proper sampling process and a much, much larger sample.

The exercise is worse than useless. It would be better to report the results of a properly conducted survey, or calculations showing how people will be affected under different circumstances.

Sometimes, the question put to people is one they cannot possibly answer competently. For example, 'How will this budget affect you personally?' is a difficult question that a tax accountant might be able to answer after a couple of hours of reading the budget and fiddling with a spreadsheet or tax package. To stop people in the street and ask them is a total waste of time.

At other times the response the interviewee gives is a very familiar one that politicians have been using for a while. The interviewee answered easily but did we learn anything?

**No Method:** A basic mistake in reporting research studies is to state the conclusions of their authors, and sometimes also the findings of the study, but not the methods used in the study. This means that viewers/readers cannot evaluate the new evidence and might be misled by research studies that are less well designed than they should have been.

The method should always be explained, especially key points about survey response rate, wording of key questions, method of selecting respondents, and so on. If this is too much for a TV bulletin then the story either cannot be used on TV or the presenter can refer to more information on the website.

At present the BBC often fails to give the method even on its website.

### **Convenient narrowness**

One way to avoid the extra complexity of multiple possible truths is to just ignore most of them.

**Minimal Explanation Set:** In this pattern, alternative explanations are not mentioned or discussed. This can create the impression that the one theory the

reporter has mentioned or is operating under is the only possible explanation.

For example, in the case of the Grenfell Tower fire the BBC's initial assumption was that local government was to blame, and perhaps behind them the government in some way, probably to do with funding. Alternative hypotheses at that early stage, largely ignored by the BBC, could have included faulty workmanship by building contractors, deceptive safety rating of cladding panels by the supplier, or by a fire safety consultant, and faulty design of the renovations. Further hypotheses were possible concerning factors that might have started the fire or exacerbated the problem, from faulty electrical work, a faulty fridge, poor siting or maintenance of the fridge, blocking of the stairwell, overcrowding of the building due to possible illegal sub-letting, people sleeping rough in public areas of the building, and so on.

This is not to say that any of these is a correct explanation. The point is that in the days following the fire the BBC coverage ignored all these possibilities and focused on the idea that the local council was to blame. It reported calls for resignations with no attempt to discuss alternative hypotheses about the true culpability of the people under pressure.

There is a typical human tendency to think too narrowly about possible explanations and jump to conclusions. Our society has law courts because mobs cannot be trusted to reach fair decisions that reflect the evidence properly. This tendency is made worse if emotions are strong, vested interests are strong, or if people are keen to score political points.

The duty of reporters is to avoid jumping to conclusions themselves and counter it in society by pointing out reasonable alternative explanations. Not to do so

risks precipitating mob behaviour and angry scenes that otherwise might not have occurred.

**Research Gaps:** Many stories develop over a period of days, weeks, or even years. Reporters can be forgiven for not doing basic research in the first few hours of a breaking story but as the days roll by, far too often, the news coverage gets no better informed. Obvious questions remain unanswered.

The case of the baby Charlie Gard was in many respects reported quite well by the BBC, though it could have done more to explain to its viewers the nature of the progressive genetic disease with no known cure that eventually killed him, and the status of the proposed treatment by nucleoside bypass therapy (NBT). (More information on this was provided by the BBC's website.)

One gap in their reporting of this drawn out story, and the reason for mentioning it, concerns the fact that the hospital treating Charlie had applied for ethical permission to try NBT. The hospital said that, by the time permission was given, Charlie had deteriorated too far to be helped by it, even if it did work. The obvious questions are: (1) Who had to give the ethical permission? (2) Why did this take long enough for the permission to be useless? (3) Why did the High Court's decision on 11 April 2017 indicate that the hospital got no further than deciding to apply for ethical permission?

### Convenient consistency

Faced with inconsistent or inconvenient evidence the reporter can simplify the job by choosing to ignore or withhold information that might upset the frame the reporter prefers.

**Critical Fact Gap:** The fault here is to omit at least one critical fact that makes the story hard to interpret or would

reveal the journalist's spinning of the story.

For example, a recent story concerned a small child killed by its drug-addicted parents weeks after moving from one area of the UK to another. According to the reporter, using material from an official report, the family was 'known to' the social services department in its initial location but the area they moved to did not act sufficiently on the information it received. What does 'known to' mean? Does it mean the parents were known to be a threat to the life of their child? Or does it just mean the family was known to have needed a bit of practical support on financial matters, or something else? It is crucial to our interpretation that we understand what 'known to' means so the reporter should either have explained this or explained that this crucial information was missing from the official report.

Boats of emigrants from Libya trying to reach Europe raised a number of rather obvious practical questions about the businesses behind the boats and about what happens to emigrants fished out of the sea. BBC coverage initially focused on the numbers drowning, but without the factual background. Only relatively recently, with EU measures announced to tackle the problems, has the BBC started to report (on its website) some of the factual background.

It is hard for the viewer to judge whether the reporter has made the omission due to carelessness or to engineer a particular spin on the story. Whatever the true motives, a poor impression is left, debate is made more complex and inconclusive, and appropriate action with public support is made less likely.

### Rudeness instead of analysis

News presenters often think it appropriate to interview senior politicians

in a rude, hostile way. Perhaps they think it is the way to get to the truth, or that it makes them look good, or perhaps they just like to feel superior to politicians who are paid so much less than they are. Most likely interviewers think it constitutes an effort to get to the truth, as required by BBC Editorial Guidelines. This way is easier than doing analysis and asking intelligent questions to extract more of the useful information that is available.

Often they badger the interviewee with questions the interviewee clearly does not want to answer or cannot answer, instead of moving on to questions that will get answers and may extract useful new information.

Here are some techniques used to give the interviewee a hard time unfairly.

### **Unreasonable Demand for**

**Information:** Examples include asking for exact numbers of immigrants, details of costs for plans that are still being worked out, and answers on how the government will solve some impossible problem.

A very different conversation develops if the question is something like 'Are you in a position to tell us more about the causes of this problem?' followed by something like 'Is it known what proportion of cases are due to that cause?', and even 'What has been done so far to find out?'

### **Unreasonable Demand for Decisions:**

A similar tactic is to press for decisions that have yet to be made, sometimes where it is obvious that information is missing that will soon be available.

Again, it is better to start out with 'Are you in a position to tell us what you plan to do about...?' and move on to something else if the answer is 'No.'

### **Unreasonable Demand for**

**Guarantees:** 'Can you guarantee that no

...?' is the typical format for a question no politician can honestly answer in most cases. Life just is not that simple and large government departments are hard to control. Somebody somewhere could screw up and the promise would be broken. Many policies have to be launched with no more than a hope of making a positive difference because information is poor and the alternative is to continue with a bad situation. Asking for guarantees is unreasonable.

### **Interrupting Interviewees**

**Unnecessarily:** When an unreasonable question has been asked and the politician has tried to dodge around it the next tactic is to interrupt and repeat the question. This may be with slight anger and in a way that implies the politician is trying to evade a legitimate question asked in the public interest.

Jeremy Paxman is infamous for disdainful, aggressive interviews but in his interview with the Sunday Times he admitted that he could not think of a time over his 25 year career when he discovered something important and fresh by his interviewing.

It would be better to ask a sensible question in the first place and, if no good answer is forthcoming, move on to another sensible question.

**Interruption Barrage:** The tactic of interrupting can be taken to a point where the interviewee is prevented from finishing any sentence because of a continual stream of different interruptions. The interruptions are usually superficial and trivial because those are easy to produce with little thought. Nevertheless, the interviewee is prevented from making any coherent points and pushed from one topic to another without being allowed to deal with any one of them.



This is done by various BBC news reporters from time to time, and by the chair of Question Time. Nothing positive is achieved by this.

**Asking for Rhetoric:** Instead of probing for information, interviewers sometimes press for rhetoric. A typical phrasing is 'What would you say to people who...?' This is usually some emotionally charged hot potato, not a simple request for information.

**Hypothetical Choice with No Popular Answers:** Sometimes politicians hold views that they do not want to repeat prominently. Pushing them to reveal their true views is a legitimate and useful tactic. A problem comes when the interviewee is faced with a hypothetical question where no answer is acceptable. A hypothetical and extreme illustration would be 'If you had to choose between killing a black baby and a white baby, which...?'

A well-known real example is the question 'Would you be happy to order people, police or military, to shoot to kill on Britain's streets?' This was put to Jeremy Corbyn and left him struggling for words. 'Shoot to kill' is not an official policy and has more than one interpretation. The phrase 'shoot to kill' was used in Northern Ireland to allege that there was a policy of shooting suspects without trying to arrest them. In the UK today it may refer to the fact that armed officers are required to protect life, their own and other innocent potential victims. That can mean them shooting to kill someone, and quickly, such as if they are wearing explosives or have hostages. However, it must be reasonable under the circumstances. Corbyn was given the choice of saying 'Yes' to something that sounded like endorsement of an illegal 'shoot to kill' policy, or 'No' to something that is also interpreted as reasonable

action to protect the officer and the public.

**Controversial Figure:** The tactic here is to paint the interviewee as in some way a trouble maker because things they have said have been followed by angry reactions. It might be true that the interviewee is a trouble maker, but perhaps it is the people reacting who are the real source of the trouble. Perhaps the person painted as 'controversial' is making a legitimate and much needed challenge to a person or group that has been getting away with something for too long.

Variations on this tactic include saying that something the interviewee has *said* is 'controversial', and using alternative words e.g. 'inflammatory' and 'invidious'.

The question of whether the interviewee is 'controversial' needs to be approached cautiously. Interviewees and questions to them should never be introduced this way.

**Amused and Bemused:** In this tactic the interviewer appears to find the interviewee so strange and foolish that their behaviour is both incomprehensible and amusing. The interviewer may smile, snigger, and confess to being confused or not understanding.

The biologist and writer Richard Dawkins gets this reaction from time to time with interviewers who cannot understand why he talks so candidly and honestly about topics that are well established rhetorical battlegrounds. The reporters think that, surely, some more tactful marketing campaign would be a better approach. Dawkins, however, is not a marketing man and clearly believes that rigorous objectivity and honesty is the right way for him to work.

**You are Ridiculous:** In this tactic the interviewer makes it clear by questions

and tone that they think the interviewee is ridiculous. You might think this is so rude that they would never do it. As an example, when Jeremy Paxman interviewed Ann Coulter about her book, *Godless: the Church of Liberalism*, he started by saying 'Your publishers gave us chapter 1, Ann Coulter. I've read it. Does it get any better?'

### Ersatz facts

If using facts is too much effort an alternative is to present what you have in a way that subtly suggests it is some kind of fact.

**Claim as Headline:** Some news items are introduced with a statement quoted from, or summarising, a report produced by a pressure group. Something like: 'The government's not doing enough to help young mothers. That's according to a new report.' The problem is that the headline statement gets undue prominence and is presented as if fact. Only later does its true status emerge. Sometimes you have to wait quite a long time before the author of the report is revealed and you may never find out what the conclusion was based on.

Claims should never be used as headlines.

**Multiple Introductions:** BBC reports on its website tend to be better than television reports. In particular, pages labelled 'Reality Check' usually have a collection of all the important facts the BBC has on a persistent story, set out clearly to promote understanding. Given time to think, to write, and space to provide more information, somebody at the BBC can do an almost passable job.

One problem with the television reports is the lack of time to go into issues properly, but this is made far worse by the BBC's time wasting habits. In a classic Multiple Introduction the news anchor in

the studio will introduce the story, making some basic points about it. He or she then hands over to the reporter 'on the spot' who goes into an introduction repeating the same or very similar points before giving way to a pre-recorded piece by the same reporter, that begins with essentially the same introduction, a third time. If the story is important enough we might be treated to a little interview in the studio where the anchor asks a question of a more senior specialist reporter, such as 'What does this mean for the government?' The specialist begins his or her reply with a repetition of the same points that we have just heard before making some obvious statements.

By padding out their reports with repetition of the few thoughts they have, they fritter time away and waste opportunities to present and explain properly.

**Using Timing to Suggest Causality:** If the causal link between one event and another is uncertain then the reporter can avoid asserting it explicitly, which would require evidence and checking, and just imply the causality by mentioning timing. For example, 'X died after being arrested by the police' gives the distinct impression that the police killed X. 'The demonstration was peaceful until the police turned up' strongly hints that the police got rough.

Those examples come from a BBC report where some citizens had already jumped to the conclusion that the police had killed someone. The reporter's approach is likely to confirm their views and incite further anger and bottle throwing.

**A Sharp Increase:** Annual statistics are published in huge numbers by organizations like the UK's Office of National Statistics. Those usually show changes from one year to the next and some time series are more bumpy than

others. This is especially true of series based on quite rare events or small populations. Also, within any large set of annual statistics there will be some sub-categories that have a large absolute or percentage change from the previous period, even if nothing underlying has really changed.

The pattern, A Sharp Increase, involves introducing a news item by describing a change as A Sharp Increase, even if the change is unremarkable (because the series is generally bumpy, or because this is just one of many sub-series).

There are alternative words. Substitutes for 'sharp' include 'sudden', 'steep', 'dramatic', 'marked', 'worrying', and 'alarming.' Substitutes for 'increase' include 'rise', 'jump', 'fall', and 'decrease.'

When British Gas increased its energy prices to customers in August 2017, the BBC focused on the increase, which was considerably more than the general rate of inflation. To present this fairly it should have showed a chart of British Gas's prices compared to its competitors over the past 3 years, and compared to general inflation over the same period. This would have shown if British Gas was indeed out of line.

### **Over-interpreting Correlation**

**Studies:** As has been pointed out very clearly by Ben Oldacre, most reporters are unable to report even slightly scientific stories without getting it wrong in some way. This particular pattern is typical for health stories where a study has identified a statistical link between doing something and some kind of ill-health. The most popular are those that link something a lot of people like to eat or drink with cancer or heart disease.

These simply should never be reported other than by specialist science reporters with the right training and skills.

**Could Be As Much As:** Imagine that a team of climate scientists has done some modelling to predict future impacts of climate change. Their forecasts are, of course, uncertain. Reporting these results is a minefield of potential mistakes.

A common form of words for reporters is '...could be as much as...', used to introduce almost any number from the original scientific journal paper, including the mean forecast, 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, highest result from an ensemble of 50, and so on.

In all cases, the fundamental problem is that the greater the ignorance of the forecasters, the wider their range of guesses should logically be. Someone who knows nothing of climatology could honestly think that some absurd future values 'could be' true. If you want to report scary numbers in your news bulletin all you have to do is find someone willing to say that, for them, a particular scary number seems possible.

A secondary mistake here is that, in most cases, the high number mentioned in the journal paper is not the highest possibility generated by the model, but instead something like the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile. In theory it could be higher still, but is much more likely to be lower, perhaps much lower.

The best way to report this kind of forecast is with a picture of the forecast distribution, with key statistics read out. The wording '...could be as much as...' is almost never appropriate.

**Advocacy Survey Questions:** Some research reported on the BBC is research designed specifically to support a campaign and some of it uses tricks to mislead.

A familiar trick is to ask people if they have ever experienced X, Y, or Z where X is something very serious and rare but Z

is something not at all serious and very common. For example, 'Have you ever been served food in a restaurant that was infected with potentially deadly bacteria, rotting, or undercooked?' Well, yes, I have been served undercooked food in a restaurant and I still remember that piece of fish.

When reported as an attention-grabbing story headline the survey finding might sound something like this: 'Is there a crisis of food hygiene in London's restaurants and what is the government doing about it? A new study reports that over 73% of people eating in London have been served food that was infected, rotting, or undercooked.'

All research should be carefully scrutinized by reporters and either presented in a way that offsets potential misinterpretation, or not used at all. This is true even if the research happens to advocate something the reporter very much believes to be true.

### Miscellaneous faults

**Throwaway Final Knock:** In their attempts to present some semblance of balance or critical analysis, reporters will often finish their report with a final questioning comment. When the topic concerns something being done by the government, this is usually put as a Throwaway Final Knock. For example, '...but critics say...'; '...but that won't be the end of this matter and the government looks set for more problems ahead.'; or '... the Prime Minister wants this matter settled, but will she get her way?'

**One Sided Pseudo-balance:** This is a subtle distortion that looks superficially like an even-handed report. In the typical case the reporter explains that the government has announced a plan and

finishes the report by saying '... but critics say this does not go far enough.' The obvious thing that comes to mind is to wonder which critics these were. The less obvious but more important question is to ask if there were other critics who said the government had gone *too far*. Probably there were, or would have been if they had been asked by the reporter.

In a large country with many different interests and points of view just about everything the government does or says is criticised by many people and in all directions. Indeed, if all criticism was pulling them in one direction, with no other voices, the government would worry that it had not struck the right balance between competing interests.

A good government that makes rational decisions that recognize legitimate competing interests fairly would still be resented and criticised by the many factions that did not get what they wanted.

**Pro-Con Stopping Point:** In a 'Reality Check' web page, the BBC examined a statement by a politician claiming that the north of England is treated poorly on rail travel compared to the south. His specific claim was that a particular route now took longer than it had in 1962. The BBC article confirmed that this was true but also pointed out that this was because the journey now had several extra stops, and that other common journeys in the area were faster than in 1962. It also went on to point out that speed is not always important as a reason for investment in rail because rail use has increased hugely and so capacity is a big issue.

So far so good. The fact checking exercise had revealed a politician selecting the one fact that supported his case and ignoring all the others that did not.

However, the BBC tends to regard the north of England as poor and disadvantaged compared to the south. To stop the article at this point would leave an impression that the north had nothing to complain about.

The article carried on by analysing the politician's claim that funding for rail is also unfairly low for the north. The article confirmed that more is spent on London's rail network than on wide areas of the north of England and that, even on a per head basis, Londoners have more spent on them to support rail.

That is the point at which the article stops, and so the article provides some support for the politician and for the north of England.

However, London property prices are much higher than those in the north, and that makes everything more expensive. If the article had returned to the problem of journey times it could have used data from the Office of National Statistics, reanalysed by the Trade Union Congress. These show that in 2015 some 930,000 Londoners had a commute more than 2 hours long, compared to 552,000 in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humberside combined. Compared to 2010, the situation has got worse in all these regions but, while the north had an extra 80,000 people commuting for more than 2 hours, London had an extra 136,000.

In short, although London has a lot spent on its rail system it is Londoners that experience the longest journeys.

The overall impression left by a story with arguments both ways depends to some extent on where you stop the analysis.

#### **Persistent Popular Misconceptions:**

Despite being in enormously influential positions in society, BBC reporters still believe popular misconceptions and

continue operating under their influence for years. They sustain and spread those misconceptions. This is despite those misconceptions being pointed out, repeatedly, with good reasons, by competent people.

For example, in reporting on business and the economy reporters continue to operate under the misconception that increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is and should be the main goal of economic management. In reporting on the progress of the alcoholic drinks industry they continue to operate under the assumption that reduction of that industry (e.g. pubs closing) is a bad thing.

#### **Allowing Obvious Misconceptions:**

Sometimes it is obvious that many viewers are likely to misunderstand a story. For example:

- In stories about the economy, productivity is easily confused with productive efficiency, but productivity is really company turnover per unit of labour, so can rise when a market becomes less competitive.
- Government debt is easily confused with the deficit.
- The national debt is another name for government debt but sounds like it is the debts of the whole nation.
- The weather is not the same as its long term average, which is climate.
- The various institutions of the EU are easily confused (European Parliament, European Commission, European Council, Council of the European Union) and these are also easily confused with the Council of Europe.
- The involvement of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) makes it sound like somebody has made a complaint, but in fact in serious cases the IPCC is involved automatically even when there has

been no complaint and there is no specific reason to think the police have misbehaved.

- A protest calling for 'justice for X' suggests that X has in some way been wronged, even if there is no specific evidence of that.

Reports that fail to provide explanations and warnings against obvious likely misinterpretations are unhelpful. In some cases they can incite people to outrage that is not justified. The BBC should do better.

The BBC should also carry out frequent polls to identify and track common misconceptions among viewers so that they know what needs to be countered if reports are to be correctly understood by viewers.

**Framing Words:** Some words and phrases are used by campaigners as part of their advocacy. For example, 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' are alternative framings concerning abortion. The phrase 'peace movement' is trying to identify unilateral disarmament and avoiding conflict as the best ways to achieve peace, not deterrent. Similarly, the phrases 'public service' and 'free market' are attempts to pre-empt discussion of what works best using language. A business in profit might be described as 'greedy' or 'value adding' depending on whose side you are on.

To describe poor people as 'deprived' is to suggest that someone else has somehow stopped them getting something. That might be true but is not proven simply by their poverty. To call people throwing stones and bottles at police 'protestors' or 'demonstrators' gives them a certain moral status that may not be deserved. Perhaps they are just 'rioters' or 'looters'? Perhaps there is a mix of people.

Do you describe someone who is poor and unemployed as 'under-privileged',

'working class', 'unemployed', or 'living on benefits'? Is someone who is employed on a 'zero hours contract' always being 'exploited' and more deserving of protection than someone who is 'self-employed' (i.e. has no employer at all, no guarantee of income, no paid leave, and no minimum wage)?

The phrase 'male dominated' is often used when there are more men than women, but it also suggests that the men are dominant over the women, which may not be true. Similarly, 'under-represented' is sometimes used just because of demographic statistics, not because representation is involved (as in a political system or standards committee, for example).

BBC news people have a tendency to use some of these words without really checking if they are appropriate.

**A Straight Answer:** This next tactic seems like a very sensible one to use in interviews and well suited to skewering people who deserve it. Unfortunately, it very rarely works and so a better approach is needed.

In the typical situation, a guilty politician or someone who wishes death on his enemies is being interviewed and the interviewer wants to establish something crucial. The key question might be something like:

- 'Minister, did you or did you not know about these illegal payments before they were made?'
- 'Do you think anyone who leaves your organization should be killed?'
- 'Did you condone this sexual abuse when you were working for the charity?'

These are questions the interviewees do not want to answer honestly, but they are reluctant to tell an outright lie. They worry that if they just answer with a

simple 'Yes' or 'No' then they will get themselves into trouble. The zealot does not want to enrage his own group by denying something they all believe, but does not want to say something that is illegal, incriminating, or will seem cruel to many viewers. The crooked politician does not want to admit to wrongdoing, but also does not want to make a clear denial that an opponent might be able to disprove.

None of these interviewees wants to be recorded giving a simple 'Yes' or 'No' answer to a clear question that can then be replayed out of context, making it look worse than it otherwise would.

So, instead of answering directly, they launch into a long, general explanation of their reasons without giving a straight answer. Eventually the interviewer interrupts and tries again, prompting the same response, and so on.

This is a waste of time, but how about asking the question in a different way. For example, 'Minister, did you know about these illegal payments before they were made? We need a straight Yes or No first, then please go on to give your reasons.' Asked this way it is harder to make an incriminating sound bite, and yet the request for a straight answer is clearer.

**Scientists Say:** Results from scientific studies are often attributed to 'scientists' using a phrase like 'Scientists say that by 2050...' It is as if all scientists got together and agreed a statement. In reality, *some* scientists said this in a paper. Almost certainly more than 99.9% of scientists were not involved. Some probably would question the results or disagree firmly. This attribution mistake is made worse when there is some reason to doubt the objectivity of the scientists. For example, 'Scientists say that drinking a litre of cider a day reduces the risk of

heart attacks' conveys a very different impression to 'A scientific study funded by the Cider Producers' Association has concluded that a litre of cider a day reduces the risk of heart attacks.' (This is a completely fictitious illustration, though conceivably the cider might kill you by some other means before a heart attack can.)

**Emotive Headline Words:** Far too many headlines contain words that have an emotional impact due to connotations that are unjustified by the facts available or are simply vague. For example, in the headline 'Mental health patients stranded in units for years' the word 'stranded' sounds like a really bad thing. However, it's not clear how a person can be 'stranded' in hospital, cared for around the clock by highly trained people.

The reality behind the story is that some patients have spent time in acute care units when they were ready for less intense care but a place for them was not found. Clearly we would expect the less intense care to be cheaper to provide, so this could also be a story about inefficient management or lack of coordination between people responsible for health provision.

Many examples of this appear but choice clichés are 'revolving door' and 'postcode lottery'.

**Emotions Before Facts:** Determined to focus on caring and to maximise the emotional impact of stories, reports sometimes begin with material based on the emotions of a situation and what people have said, only later providing facts that provide essential context.

A story about a suicidal girl's care plan focused initially on the judge's statements about 'shame' and 'blood on our hands', building the idea that some terrible care failure had taken place. Eventually we learn that the girl was extremely difficult

to care for because she had made multiple attempts to kill herself, was willing to hit her head against a wall repeatedly to do this, and had to be checked every 50 seconds while taking a shower. The acute unit that initially had to care for her had spent an additional £125,000 in six months on her care and yet still had complaints from other patients who said their care had suffered because of the resources placed on the care of the suicidal girl. There may still have been a failure to care well for this sad girl, but the sheer difficulty of the task is important context that readers need to know. Holding that back and releasing only clues in an uncoordinated manner later in the story was wrong.

Important factual context should be presented clearly before consequences and emotions are tackled.

### **Maximum Problems, Minimum**

**Solutions:** The story about mental health patients 'stranded' in units for years also illustrates a pattern of focusing on problems and minimising solutions. In this particular story, the initial 96.7% of the story is given over to sad stories about individuals and statistics on the worst cases. These are techniques used to build the negative emotion of the story. The overall picture, including areas of the country where better performance was achieved, is not given.

Along the way we are told that this is not a new situation and that an official report into the problem was published the previous year. However, this report is used to provide further worrying statistics, not as a link to start discussing the response to the report, or improvements it suggested.

The technique of taking failures from any point in the previous year *or more* allows the reporter to pull together a lot of worrying facts.

Only in the final two paragraphs is a short statement by the National Health Service given, mentioning £400m of extra money. There will have been considerable detail behind this that could have been written about but the BBC news report chose to minimise material on remedies.

In total, 29 words on the solutions now planned are provided in an article of 884 words, which is about 3.3% of the total.

### **Instead of BBC News**

If you want to be well informed, are there better sources than BBC news?

For the UK, one good source is the Office of National Statistics (ONS). For example, in one BBC story it was stated that hate crimes against gay people were on the rise, without stating the source or even what period of time was being considered. In contrast, the ONS report on the subject covers the various sources of data, the problem of increased reporting (which accounts for most of the increase in Police Recorded Hate Crime), and the lack of a convincing links to potentially inflammatory events. On the last point, it seems that, in the short term, hate crimes rise and fall along with similar crimes that lack the hate motivation. The ONS bulletin makes helpful comparisons between different sources.

The data available from the ONS cover a staggering range of topics and are usually illuminating and well presented. The homepage offers highlights, latest reports, and many other features designed to make the data accessible.

[www.ons.gov.uk/](http://www.ons.gov.uk/)

On the specific issue of hate crime, the USA has a website dedicated to this one topic, collecting together data from across the USA. In these numbers you



can see not only the characteristics of the victim but also the characteristics of the perpetrator.

[ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015](http://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015)

If you combine these with figures on the racial make-up of the USA you can calculate rates per person.

If you are interested in crime near you then you may be able to find official maps of crime. In the UK there is a website that can show you, month by month, street by street detail of all recorded crimes. This shows the type of the crime and what happened as a result. Of course, you cannot see who the victim or perpetrator was, but you can see what types of crime dominate and where they take place.

I was surprised at how many crimes take place near where I live, which is a low crime area compared to most other parts of the UK.

The website also provides charts and comparisons, so you can see how your area compares to others and how things have changed over time.

[www.police.uk/](http://www.police.uk/)

In addition, police forces are regularly inspected and the inspector's website is another good source of information, including performance statistics.

[www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/](http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/)

For medical stories, consider the British Medical Journal and The Lancet, which often have accessible articles that bring deep knowledge to topical issues the BBC cannot deal with properly.

[www.bmj.com/](http://www.bmj.com/)

[www.thelancet.com/](http://www.thelancet.com/)

News media tend to focus on dramatic deaths, creating a rather distorted picture of how people die. If you want to understand what is really likely to kill you

then consider looking at official health statistics. The ONS has reported on 'avoidable' deaths in the UK.

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath)

Statistics on deaths from all causes are available from Eurostats.

[ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Causes\\_of\\_death\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Causes_of_death_statistics)

You can also learn about the rate of different kinds of accident using the statistics page of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents website.

[www.rospa.com/resources/statistics/](http://www.rospa.com/resources/statistics/)

I was very surprised by some of these statistics.

Air quality is one issue that might have a strong bearing on your health, especially in old age, and affects quality of life. For the UK there is an excellent official website.

[uk-air.defra.gov.uk/](http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/)

It also has an interactive map that lets you see where various types of pollution are worst.

[uk-air.defra.gov.uk/data/gis-mapping](http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/data/gis-mapping)

There are also short range pollution forecasts provided by the Met Office.

[uk-air.defra.gov.uk/forecasting/](http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/forecasting/)

The weather is a big topic for BBC reporting, but you can go direct to the best source: the Met Office.

[www.metoffice.gov.uk/](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/)

Instead of letting someone tell you what the weather will be like, consider looking at the rainfall radar to find out what weather is coming your way over the next few hours. Just view the animation of rain over the past few hours and

imagine what that means for the next hour or so. This is excellent for decisions about when to go out shopping or put washing out to dry.

[www.metoffice.gov.uk/public/weather/observation/rainfall-radar](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/public/weather/observation/rainfall-radar)

For a worldwide view of economic and welfare issues, consider the World Bank.

[data.worldbank.org/](http://data.worldbank.org/)

Its data, and similar data from other sources, have been pulled together onto one of the most awesome statistical websites in existence: Gapminder, inspired by Hans Rosling. The animated information graphics are very interesting and understandable.

[www.gapminder.org/](http://www.gapminder.org/)

For fact checking on general news stories from the USA, consider FactCheck.org.

[www.factcheck.org/](http://www.factcheck.org/)

Associated Press is quite good, but USA focused.

[hosted.ap.org/dynamic/fronts/HOME?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME](http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/fronts/HOME?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME)

Many other useful sources could be identified but the pattern emerging is clear. If you want to be better informed, go direct to the most reliable sources of information and look for facts. Today, those sources have websites and you can bookmark those and, in some cases, set up alerts so that news is sent to you.

## Conclusion

News reporting involves an effort to discover and report the truth, but this can be difficult. It can be difficult to assess how important a story is, or what aspects of it are most important. It can be difficult to establish the truth and complex to report when there are multiple possibilities.

Much more is at stake than the reputation and funding of the BBC. Its bad reporting practices undermine the ability of citizens to understand events and counter their own tendencies to be outraged unnecessarily, to worry more even when things are getting better, and to rage at public servants even when they are doing quite well at difficult jobs.

However, there are simple techniques that can be used and there are bad practices that should always be avoided. The viewing public should look for more effort to collect and analyse evidence, to cover more possibilities, and to provide quantitative facts about the wider context of stories. We should also be suspicious of reports based on giving just the opinions of people who disagree with each other, which is no substitute for good reporting.

## References

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