

BBC: IN THE BALANCE?

With its funding under threat and criticism of its supposed impartiality more vocal than ever, the BBC's enemies are circling. But, asks Giles Gough, is the BBC actually its own worst enemy?

There appears to be something of a shake up going on at the BBC. In recent months, many high-level presenters such as Vanessa Feltz, Simon Mayo, Steve Wright, Paul O'Grady, Graham Norton and Sue Barker have either been demoted by the corporation or have taken a step back from their high profile roles. Now a media personality leaving one job for the next is expected as part of the churn, as people's lives and priorities change. But this rate of change is higher than usual, and it would seem somewhat out of the BBC's control. So why are so many household names heading out of the door?

Well, the first reason is obvious: money. The British Broadcasting Corporation is publicly owned and funded mainly through the TV licence. It's supplemented by its commercial subsidiaries like BBC studios and licensing rights to BBC properties. Whilst that may sound like a lot, the

BBC has a vast number of outlets to keep running. This means that they can't offer presenters quite as much as their commercial rivals might. In addition to that, because they're publicly funded, how they use that money is open to public scrutiny.

As a result, every year the BBC has to publish its list of the highest earners. Whilst this is good for transparency, it can lead to questions about whether they're value for money. Gary Lineker tops the list, earning £1.35million. If we compare him to Lyse Doucet, (the BBC's Chief International Correspondent, who routinely reports from dangerous places around the world like Afghanistan during the Taliban take over), you have to ask whether you think his contribution of talking about football is nine times more valuable than hers. Whichever side of that debate you fall on, it must be uncomfortable for Lineker to be the subject of that kind of conversation.

Therefore, making the jump to the private sector, where salaries are kept hidden, must be an enticing prospect.

But what if it's not just about money or public scrutiny? When Andrew Marr left the BBC in 2021, he said he was 'keen to get my own voice back'. But why would the man who presented the top political show on Sunday mornings, the man who held politicians of every stripe and status to account for sixteen years feel like the job robbed him of his voice? The answer, paradoxically, may lie with impartiality, the ability to give a balanced and fair representation of any issue, no matter how controversial or divisive. Lack of impartiality is something the BBC gets regularly accused of. Over the last few years, the BBC has been accused of being biased against everyone from Momentum to UKIP. But if, as a journalist, everyone thinks you're biased against them, it probably means you're doing your job well. The BBC is 'required to

In order for us to make good choices at the ballot box, we need to be well-informed by a press who are not interested in keeping everyone happy, but in telling us the truth.

deliver duly impartial news by the Royal Charter and Agreement and to treat controversial subjects with due impartiality'. Impartiality is key to the BBC's success as a trustworthy purveyor of news. But what if that impartiality could be weaponised and turned against the BBC itself?

This was an issue raised by Emily Maitlis earlier this year. Emily Maitlis has been in the public eye since at least 2006 when she started presenting *Newsnight*. Since then, she has been a stalwart of political coverage. However, her stature in the public consciousness rose in 2019 when she interviewed Prince Andrew about his friendship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Through her calm delivery and respectful demeanour, she gave the Prince, if you'll forgive the phrase, just enough rope to hang himself.

Maitlis attracted further controversy during Covid over Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson's then Chief Adviser. During one of the most restrictive times of lockdown, when people were ordered to stay in their homes, Cummings took a 260-mile round trip to his parents from London to Durham and even managed to fit in a trip to Barnard Castle for his wife's birthday. When Maitlis reported on this for *Newsnight* she said in the opening monologue:

Dominic Cummings broke the rules. The country can see that and it's shocked the government cannot [...] He made those who struggled to keep to the rule feel like fools and has allowed many more to assume they can now flout them.

Speaking out:
Emily Maitlis at
the Edinburgh TV
Festival in 2022



PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

By presenting both sides of an argument with equal status and visibility, it greatly elevated the opinion that was not just heavily in the minority, but often demonstrably wrong.

Despite Maitlis saying what was patently obvious to anyone following the story, Downing Street complained and BBC bosses judged that Maitlis' monologue broke impartiality rules.

This may have been a contributing factor in her decision to leave the BBC after two decades. Last August, Maitlis launched her new podcast 'the News Agents' with another former BBC journalist, Jon Sopel, and former Sky journalist, Lewis Goodall. Just prior to the launch, she gave the McTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh TV festival where she identified a range of 'mistakes' that she had made which

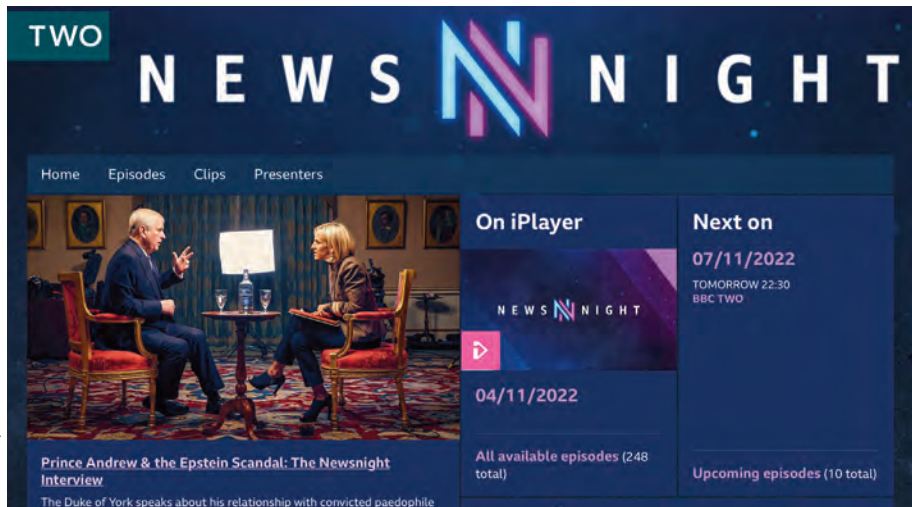
she wanted to convey to the next generation of journalists.

Self-Censorship

Early on in her speech, Maitlis stated that

Politics has changed but we as journalists have not caught up.

This is a reference to the rise of 'populism'. Populism is a stance where political figures position themselves as the 'voice of the people' fighting against a self-interested 'elite' (see definition on page 27). Populism does not have an ideology, it can be left-wing or right-wing, and it has a tendency to increase tension as it assumes the other party is always acting in bad faith. Populist leaders tend to always think of themselves as outsiders even when they become the establishment. Whilst Donald Trump is perhaps the most famous example of a populist leader, Boris Johnson was one as well. He had a tendency to discredit the media any time the coverage was negative. So, when Downing Street complained over Emily Maitlis' monologue on Dominic Cummings' breaking of lockdown rules, the BBC, eager to show it was being impartial, ruled that Maitlis had broken



Pizza Express? Maitlis took Prince Andrew to task in her BBC interview

impartiality rules and reprimanded her for it. Maitlis noted in her speech how news outlets have become 'primed to back down, even apologise, to prove how journalistically fair we are being'. This has led to a reflexive self-censorship by journalists, who have become more scared of contentious issues for fear of the public backlash. As Jon Sopel put it:

The most dangerous thing that I think we can do as journalists is to do this self-censoring when we think 'ooh that story, there's gonna be protests about that, we just won't do it'.

Not only was tackling difficult issues becoming a problem for journalism, but the very way they tackled them was no longer fit for purpose.

Both Sides-ism

A standard approach for any news programme addressing any controversial topic is to have the news anchor report on it, then mediate a discussion between two experts with opposing views. For decades, this has been a tried and tested approach, but with the rise of populism, it has become problematic. When reflecting on *Newsnight's* coverage of the Brexit referendum, Maitlis said:

It might take our producers five minutes to find sixty economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole voice who espoused it...But by the time we went on air we simply had one of each; we presented this unequal effort to our audience as balance. It wasn't.

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In this way, shows like *Newsnight* strived for impartiality, and by presenting both sides of an argument with equal status and visibility, it greatly elevated the opinion that was not just heavily in the minority, but often demonstrably wrong. In this way, populist movements got to hijack the BBC's reputation for integrity in its reporting to legitimise political positions that were absolutely ridiculous. In other words, in their quest to be impartial, they had somehow become very partial indeed.

You might be wondering why any of this is relevant to you. But a free and independent media is absolutely vital to a healthy democracy. In order for us to make good choices at the ballot box, we need to be well-informed by a press who are not interested in keeping everyone happy, but in telling us the truth. As the old maxim puts it; 'if one person says it's raining and another person says it is dry, it is NOT your job to quote them both. It's your job to look out of the window and see which is the truth'.

Giles Gough is a freelance writer, podcaster, filmmaker and educator in Manchester.

 from the MM vaults

Crisis at the BBC –
Jonathan Nunns, MM77