Independent Thematic Review of the Impartiality of BBC Content on Migration

Madeleine Sumption

March 2024

FOREWORD

In April 2023, the BBC Board invited Samir Shah and me to review the BBC's migration coverage, as part of its strategy for setting and monitoring editorial standards across the Corporation. The review was designed to assess the impartiality and accuracy of content on migration across BBC UK content, including the devolved Nations and English Regions.

We conducted the bulk of the review together, interviewing external experts and BBC journalists and executives, reviewing examples of Television, Radio and Online content and overseeing audience research.

In December 2023, Samir was nominated to become BBC Chair. At this point, he stepped down from the Review to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

As a result, I wrote the final report independently. However, I am extremely grateful for Samir's contributions to all the work behind the review. The opinions in this report are my own, as are any errors.

We spoke to just over 100 people inside and outside the BBC and would like to thank them for taking the time to talk to us. They were refreshingly candid and their insights have been crucial to the work.

I'm grateful to Michael Blastland and Andrew Dilnot for their advice at the early stages of this project. Their excellent thematic review of content on UK public finances inspired our approach to the present report.

Finally, thanks to the small but excellent BBC team who supported the review so expertly.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Impartiality is not just about left vs. right. This Review uses a broad definition of impartiality that covers a wider set of questions. Does BBC content give audiences enough context and explanation, for example? Does it interrogate political claims robustly? Is it finding the stories that matter most to audiences? Are all relevant viewpoints reflected? Are journalists using clear, accurate language?

This review aims to provide practical guidance to help the BBC improve its migration coverage in all these areas.

Main findings

The BBC produces a lot of excellent content on migration. But there are also weaknesses. <u>While the review found no consistent bias towards one point of view, it found risks to impartiality that point in multiple directions</u>.

Some of the points in this report will resonate more with people with sceptical views on migration, and others will appeal more to those with liberal attitudes. Readers may feel tempted to cherry-pick the conclusions that most suit their views, although they are best seen as a package.

Explanation and depth

- <u>The most common problem this review identified was that the BBC often tells migration stories through a narrow political lens, reporting what high-profile people are saying without really getting under the skin of the issue</u> (pp.11-12). Audience research participants showed a strong appetite for more depth.

- <u>The BBC could be more assertive in interrogating political claims</u> (pp.23-28). Coverage sometimes seeks narrow 'balance' by quoting soundbites from people with opposing views. The best coverage went beyond the soundbites and gave audiences the tools to judge the arguments for themselves.

- <u>Audiences need more context and explanation</u> (pp.13-19). How does the policy actually work? How did we get to this point? Is that a big number? Is the UK unusual? Complex policies like Rwanda were particularly hard for many of them to understand.

- <u>BBC coverage could do a better job of distinguishing between different types of migration</u> (pp.13-14). In asylum stories, for example, it was often not clear that the people involved were

asylum seekers. Audiences sometimes came away with the false impression that most migration to the UK took place on small boats.

Story selection

- The selection of migration stories in BBC coverage could be more imaginative and do more to get out ahead of the political debate. Topics that were low on politicians' agenda or lacked an immediate news hook received less attention than they should, even though audiences cared about them (pp.29-30). For example, the BBC was arguably slow to pick up on one of the biggest migration stories of 2023—the sharp increase in care work visas—because politicians weren't discussing it yet.

- Coverage should pay more attention to how migration affects communities, public services, housing, and the labour market (pp. 30-31). All audiences in our research were interested in these questions, but particularly people with concerns about migration. By focusing primarily on political developments, BBC coverage can overlook some of these concerns.

- Journalists were sometimes anxious about taking on topics they felt could appear hostile to migrants, such as immigration fraud or local concerns about migration (pp.33-34). When these topics are covered with sufficient depth, however, it is possible to probe the issues at hand while also being respectful towards the people involved.

- Coverage sometimes also neglected topics that aren't obviously visible, such as emigration and integration.

- Some pieces of content received rave reviews in the audience research (p.12). Some were stories that went into depth on something audiences didn't already know. Others were well-moderated debates. What they had in common was that they went beyond the soundbites to discuss what was happening on the ground or to delve into the justification for different arguments.

Diversity of opinion and contributors

- The UK public's views on migration run the gamut from deeply sceptical to very liberal. But audiences generally recognised that migration brings both benefits and challenges. The BBC should

reflect this nuance and not just the strongest views on either side (pp.26-27, 41, 47).

- Sceptical views on migration were represented frequently but often superficially (pp.39-40). <u>Coverage could do more to explore the *reasons* for concerns about migration in detail</u>. The BBC may also be able to work harder to find a <u>wider range of experts with on the ground expertise fully to unpack arguments about the challenges migration brings</u>.

- <u>BBC journalism could make it clearer that labour migration is a choice rather than an economic necessity</u>. Discussions of labour shortages did not always sufficiently challenge employers' arguments in favour of more work visas (pp.40-41). Coverage could do more to convey the fact that the economic impacts of migration are smaller than many expect.

- <u>The perspectives and voices of migrants themselves are often missing entirely from BBC reporting</u>, and coverage sometimes loses sight of the human lives behind the stories (pp.42-44). <u>Audience members</u> with varying views on migration consistently <u>wanted to hear more from migrants themselves, though not to the exclusion of other voices or perspectives</u>.

- Hearing directly from migrants does not need to mean reporting will be biased—just as it is important to hear from people who are concerned about migration. BBC coverage should have equal empathy for migrants *and* UK residents who worry about the impacts of migration (p.43).

- Political interviews sometimes create the impression that the BBC believes the government can and should commit to a specific level of net migration (pp.44-45). Numerical targets are not the only way of managing migration.

- Audiences particularly appreciated coverage that moved beyond politics. They liked hearing from contributors with direct experience 'on the ground', such as service providers in communities across the UK with high levels of migration (pp.48-49).

Language and images

- <u>Journalists should define the migration terms they use more often</u>. Audiences do not always understand the technical differences between terms such as 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' (p.50).

- Using the terms 'migrants' and 'asylum seekers' interchangeably can confuse audiences (pp.50-51). They are not synonyms and audiences did not see them as such. BBC journalists should avoid using the term 'migration' if they are *only* talking about asylum seekers (for example: "the government's plan to tackle migration" in a story about small boats).

- Describing the arrival of asylum seekers through unauthorised routes as 'illegal immigration' is legally accurate but requires proper explanation (pp.52-54). People who claim asylum after entering without permission receive support and legal protections that make their situation very different from other unauthorised migrants. The distinction needs to be clear.

- The most striking images don't always represent the 'normal' experience (pp.58-60). For example, stories about the asylum system are often illustrated with small boat images, but recent estimates suggest more than half asylum applicants did not arrive by small boat. Over a period of time, journalists should consider how fully the images they use represent what they're discussing.

Conclusion

Many of the challenges this report discusses result not from deliberate choices, but from a lack of time or subject-specific expertise among many of the BBC journalists who find themselves reporting on migration. Interrogating claims, finding the most interesting stories, explaining the context and identifying the right contributors are all easier for journalists with subject-specific expertise *or* a lot of resources. BBC News should think carefully about protecting the migration expertise that underpins some of its most effective coverage, and develop more of it (pp.63-64).

It's tempting to discuss impartiality as if it were zero sum. That is, as if the BBC must position itself on a line labelled 'sceptical' at one end and 'liberal' at the other. In this world, airing more sceptical viewpoints might mean losing the trust of liberal audiences, and vice versa.

The critiques in this review are not zero sum. The BBC could do more to explore the challenges migration brings while *also* hearing migrants' perspectives more often, for example.

Finally, impartiality doesn't need to mean worthy and dull. Often the more imaginative commissions that departed from the day-to-day political debate were the ones that audiences across the spectrum found most engaging and trustworthy.

Brief note on methods and scope

The review examined coverage of international migration to and from the UK. It did not consider race and ethnicity more broadly. The review primarily covered the period from March to November 2022. We also reviewed more recent content on visas and net migration, which received more attention in 2023.

The judgments in this report are necessarily subjective. They are based on interviews with external experts and BBC journalists and executives; audience research; a review of samples of BBC content; and a review of complaints. The Appendix gives more detail on the methods.

The content review examined TV, Radio, and Online stories, both Network and Nations & Regions, but not the World Service. We looked at short-form and long-form programming. Unless otherwise mentioned, the findings are relevant to all these content types. We also examined social media posts.

Note: When this report refers to audience research participants, it refers specifically to the 17 focus groups commissioned for the review. Participants represented a wide range of geographies, demographic groups and attitudes towards migration.

2. IMPARTIALITY IN MIGRATION COVERAGE

Many BBC journalists are anxious about taking on migration stories. The topic is technically complex, emotional and contested. They recognise the difficulty creating impartial content, and want to get it right.

> I think sometimes colleagues who find themselves covering migration without a lot of experience of it are sometimes scared about what to do, about what language to use, about whether they're going to say something which is going to come across as problematic. Sometimes I think people are worried about the suggestion that we're going to be accused of racism by the Left. And I think sometimes they worry too much about being accused of being the wokerati by the Right, to use the word of the moment. (*Internal*)

The BBC's Action Plan in response to the Serota Review quite rightly sets a high bar for impartiality "in its broadest sense, pushing the debate beyond traditional left/right divides and addressing the challenge of audiences who do not currently feel their lives, attitudes and opinions are adequately represented or portrayed on the BBC".

Broad impartiality has several dimensions, including accuracy, how journalists select stories, the language they use, and whether coverage explains the issues clearly enough.

But when people talk about broad impartiality, they often start with diversity of opinion. In this case, whether the BBC is reflecting the full range of perspectives on migration in the UK. Section 6 (pp.37-49) discusses this question in detail. To set the stage, however, it is worth briefly discussing the diversity of opinion on migration that exists in the UK.

Viewpoints on migration

The main dividing line in the migration debate is between liberal vs. restrictive attitudes towards migration, not party-political ones. But attitudes are nuanced. Some people have liberal preferences on work migration and sceptical views on asylum or family, while others hold the opposite. Some people believe that migration has positive impacts but would like numbers to be lower. Many recognise that migration brings both costs and benefits.

As a result, it is useful to think about liberal and restrictive *views and arguments* about migration, rather than treating the people who hold them as fixed groups vying for representation.

Some external experts interviewed for the Review argued that BBC coverage implicitly promoted a restrictive or 'pro-government' agenda on migration, while others argued it had a consistent liberal bias.[*]

The challenge for this review was to identify whether these impartiality issues actually manifested in the coverage. This report focuses on the critiques we were able to substantiate through the content review and audience research. They point in multiple directions. Some are associated with sceptical perspectives on migration, some with liberal ones. Others with no specific perspective at all.

The Review does not attempt to 'add up' the criticisms to identify whether BBC coverage leans more in one direction than the other, on average. Such an exercise might miss the point, implicitly buying the idea that two wrongs make a right.

After all, being criticised equally by both sides does not necessarily indicate impartiality. Much better is a goal that BBC content is trusted by all sides. This might sound difficult. It is. But it is also achievable: some of the BBC's content already achieves this goal. This good practice needs to inform journalistic practice throughout the BBC.

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[*] Most external experts did not argue there was a consistent bias in one direction. Most had both positive and negative things to say about different aspects of BBC coverage.

3. EXPLANATION AND CONTEXT

Broad impartiality requires audiences to understand the story, what is at stake and why it matters. While there were many excellent examples of clear explanation, audiences often wanted more explanation and depth.

Here are illustrative comments from the audience research on two online stories that examined 1) small boat crossings (13 August 2023) and 2) the cancellation of the first Rwanda flight (15 June 2022), respectively:

> Government policy is not clear to me and the story did not clarify what the policy is or how a new arrangement with the French authorities will work. It was also quite disjointed jumping about in the elements being reported. There were some figures, but they did not apply to a single event, but rather covered a number of months. So coming out of the story, I was left knowing very little. I'm not sure what the story was trying to tell me. (*Audience research participant, Cardiff*)
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> I found the whole story difficult to understand. The beginning of the story there was no context. It went straight into the flight had been cancelled. I would have liked a summary at the start of the backstory relating to it. Why was the flight allowed to take off in the first place? Who has allowed it? What talks had there been? What was the justification to let asylum seekers go to Rwanda? (*Audience research participant, Wilmslow*)

Coverage with clear explanation and context is less likely to alienate the audience. Without it, audiences will fill in the gaps themselves, and not always accurately.

For example, BBC coverage often notes that most people crossing the English Channel in small boats to claim asylum are men. But this fact is rarely explained. Gender is often the only piece of information we get about asylum seekers.

Audience research participants agreed that gender was important. But without further explanation, they assumed the coverage was telling them that the people concerned were not refugees, did not require protection, posed a security threat, or were coming for work. None of these things results directly from being male. Explanation can thus be an impartiality issue.

One BBC journalist summarised the challenge nicely:

> I think our journalistic culture needs to be really sensitive to those moments where a viewer or a listener or a reader might think, 'Huh, okay, I need to know more on that,' and not leave them hanging. (*Internal*)

In a handful of cases, BBC journalists said they shied away from depth for fear of being criticised—but these concerns may well be misplaced. Two examples illustrate why.

Audience research participants said they wanted to know more about how people in small boats got the money to pay smugglers. Contributors with sceptical views on migration often argue that the cost of the trip means the migrants and refugees crossing the Channel are privileged, not vulnerable or needy.

One BBC journalist said they would be reluctant to ask where people got the money from, however. Critics might say that the question was hostile towards asylum seekers, they worried. But understanding the finances of asylum journeys might actually challenge the view that Channel crossers are privileged. Asylum journeys often involve debt, indentured labour or serious exploitation as people raise the money for the journey.

Similarly, another journalist said that colleagues were sometimes anxious about including comments from members of the public who were worried about migration. The comments could appear racist, they said. But when they asked a few more questions about *why* people were concerned, they got a more nuanced and sympathetic picture.

Depth doesn't have to mean losing the audience, either. It was often the superficial coverage that people found dull or confusing in the audience research. Stories that gave context and depth fared well. For example, some of the most highly praised content included:

- An interview on *The Nine* (BBC Scotland) with the BBC's head of statistics, Robert Cuffe (25 May 2023): a 4-minute, in-depth discussion about the drivers behind the net migration figures. Audiences felt they got a clear overview of UK migration.

- A 2½-minute package on why people leave Albania and the role of criminal gangs in helping them (BBC One and News Channel, 2 November 2022): an example of surprising, in-depth information in a short package.

- A *Politics South East* discussion of how unaccompanied asylum-seeking children affected Kent's Children's Services (BBC One SE England, 24 September 2023): this piece provided an in-depth analysis from the head of a foster carers' union.

- A 5-minute conversation between Nicky Campbell and guests from the meat processing and haulage industries (15 May 2023, Radio 5 Live): this piece went into depth on different factors driving labour shortages. Audiences felt the presenter challenged guests respectfully and helped explain and clarify the issues.

Of course, short news items can't cover every potential follow-up question. But they can address one of them each time.

Audience research participants appreciated the depth a BBC Radio 5 Live piece provided on labour shortages

The rest of this section examines a few areas where more explanation, context or depth would be particularly helpful.

Why do people move?

BBC coverage needs to convey the reasons people migrate to and from the UK more clearly. Work, study, family and protection are all governed by different policy regimes. Audiences have little background knowledge of this landscape. Distinguishing reasons for migration more clearly is an impartiality issue: if the coverage doesn't make clear which types of migration are at stake, audiences can't come to an informed view.

Coverage of the net migration statistics from November 2022 onwards has generally done a good job of distinguishing different reasons for migration. Audience research participants appreciated much of this coverage.

Asylum stories often said nothing about what asylum is and who is seeking it, however. Often, audiences would be forgiven for having no idea that it involves people who have applied for refugee status in the UK and may well qualify for it. This is an impartiality risk because it may affect perceptions about the merits of different policies. It's also part of a broader problem discussed later (Section 6, pp.38, 42-44), namely that BBC migration coverage can lose sight of the human lives behind the political or statistical story.

<u>Audience research participants, regardless of their views on migration, said they wanted more context on why people move to the UK</u>. They wanted to understand people's backstories, reasons for leaving their home countries, and reasons for choosing the UK over other destinations. And they wanted to hear directly from migrants themselves (see also pp.41-43).

This background doesn't have to take up a lot of space. A good place to start would be routinely to mention a few of the largest nationalities of people claiming asylum or crossing in small boats.

Note: Giving just the largest nationality is not enough. The top nationality changes over time and usually makes up a small minority of the total, so mentioning multiple nationalities gives a better overall picture. Doing this would also help avoid what audience research participants felt was a risk of stereotyping.

Stories about Ukrainians were different: the background to migration was usually clearly conveyed and coverage often included personal portraits of people who had fled the war.

> The Ukrainian situation, I think, is an exception because there's more media coverage of the conflict there. […] But if you think about most of the conflicts that people are coming from at the moment, there's very little media coverage in the BBC of those conflicts. So, even as a kind of broader scene-setting as to why it might be that people are migrating, you don't really have any of that in the media. (*External*)

We did find some other high-quality, in-depth coverage of reasons for migration, including a Radio 4 *Today* series in July 2023 and a number of pieces on migration from Albania. But brief explanations should be included more consistently in short-form news pieces too.

Policy backstories

<u>Audiences need the backstory, even if it must be greatly compressed</u>. Some stories have done this effectively. For example, some coverage of the December 2023 UK Supreme Court Rwanda judgment included excellent introductions explaining 'how did we get to this point?'

Coverage sometimes focuses on the latest developments to the exclusion of the backstory, however. Stories about plans for asylum accommodation in local areas are one such example. This coverage sometimes discussed the specific site without crucial context, such as the asylum backlog that had driven demand for asylum housing. Audiences usually do not bring this context to the story themselves. In the audience research, many did not know that asylum seekers were typically not allowed to work and questioned why they should require accommodation at all.

> Some of the key questions are just being taken for granted as the baseline of what's going on, and people are not really going into any analytical depth about what's happening or questioning what's happening. It's pretty superficial analysis, in my view. (*External*)

The broader context may be obvious to BBC journalists steeped in the political debate, but not to people less engaged in the news. For example, audience research participants appreciated a detailed report about Albanians with criminal records deported from the UK, but some asked why the BBC had chosen to focus on Albanians. A statistic or two on the importance of Albanians in the UK prison population would have helped to explain this editorial decision.

How policies work

Audience research participants struggled to understand the most complex policies, such as asylum and the UK-Rwanda deal, especially when coverage focused solely on the latest developments. They wanted more reminders of how migration and asylum policies worked and why they had been introduced.

Rwanda coverage did not always explain clearly enough who was to be sent to Rwanda and why, and what would happen once they got there. Often it should have been clearer that migrants and refugees would be expected to make asylum claims to the government of Rwanda, instead of the UK, and would not come back to the UK if their claim was successful.

Indeed, an otherwise excellent *Panorama* programme on people smugglers, aired five months after the Rwanda deal was announced, said that a person could be sent to Rwanda *because their asylum application was refused.* Other coverage used slightly vague language, such as "sent to Rwanda for processing", which could be misunderstood to mean that people recognised as refugees will be brought back to the UK.

More broadly, BBC content rarely unpacked how asylum policy works and what the criteria are for a successful application.

If policies are not explained, the audience may simply be left with sometimes misleading soundbites. This is a clear risk to impartiality.

> I'll tell you what frustrates me is when the Home Office or the MoD issues press statements, you know, "this is all going to be solved by sending a Royal Naval frigate to the Channel". […] But you don't get any interrogation about what's it actually doing. What is a Royal Naval frigate patrolling the Channel *doing*? It's doing nothing other than burning diesel. (*External*)
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> We shouldn't just be putting soundbites out there. We should actually look into it. (*Internal*)

Very brief explanations of how policies work can also be valuable in panel debate formats, too. For example, a highly regarded piece of content in the audience research was a clip from a *Question Time* discussion on 'safe and legal routes' (15 December 2022). Participants felt the presenter made helpful interventions to clarify the background to audience members' questions and panellists' contributions.

Audience research participants appreciated an in-depth panel discussion where the presenter explained the policy background clearly.

Finally, journalists should take care when reporting non-experts' experiences of immigration policies in the UK or overseas. Migrants often do not fully understand the immigration rules, nor do members of the UK public. While it is crucial to include personal testimonies in coverage, journalists should check that any legal and policy details make sense, given the rules in place at the time. It's understandable that non-experts will sometimes misunderstand the policies, and coverage should be clear and accurate. Accuracy, after all, is central to impartiality.

Is that a big number?

The BBC Radio 4 statistics programme, *More or Less,* has a lot of experience covering statistics. If BBC journalists took away only one thing from their *More or Less* colleagues, it should perhaps be the value of asking, "Is it a big number?"

When statistics themselves were at the centre of the news story—such as the official net migration data—BBC coverage typically answered this question well.

Audience research participants struggled to interpret statistics in many other cases, however. This was often because <u>data were sprinkled into BBC coverage with no context or guidance on what they meant</u>.

The most common example of this problem was daily figures on small boat arrivals, but the point applies more generally. A single daily number for boat arrivals is usually meaningless. Numbers fluctuate in the short term for various reasons, particularly the weather.

It's not just that audiences learn nothing from a single day's statistics—or even a week's statistics, for that matter. The figures can actively mislead. This creates an impartiality risk.

For example, audience research participants often believed that if the BBC was reporting a number, it *must* be meaningful. Many assumed that any number cited in the news was a big number. Others assumed that it must be representative—*i.e.*, that if 1,000 people arrived this week, that meant 52,000 over the year.

Where BBC coverage cites statistics such as these, giving audiences the broader trend is much more helpful than the daily, weekly or monthly figure. For example, how do arrivals over a 6-month or year-long period compare with the same period the previous year? In 2022 that trend was upwards; in 2023 it was downwards. Both are informative.

By 2023, small boats coverage started to provide more of this information on the overall trend. This was a welcome development. But the practice of *always* providing statistics in context still needs to become more deeply embedded. This is particularly true in stories where numbers are incidental rather than central, as this was where the habit of adding data without context appeared to be most widespread. This point also applies to social media (Section 9 discusses social media in more detail).

<u>If there is no room to analyse a statistic in context, it will often be better to say nothing at all than to say something meaningless that audiences will imbue with significance</u>. This is an impartiality issue. For example, if the government says it has deported 100 people and the BBC pastes that into a story, audiences may reasonably assume this is a big number, when in the context of overall removals trends, it isn't.

By contrast, audience research participants praised coverage when it broke down data and put it into context, helping them to see the overall picture more clearly.

A brief side note about statistics on audio platforms: audience research participants generally found TV coverage of statistics easier to understand because it could display figures and charts on-screen. Some found statistics in Radio pieces too difficult to process, especially when several

statistics were read out in quick succession. <u>Audio journalists may find that audiences understand the discussion better if they describe the trends rather than citing too many specific numbers</u> (*e.g.*, "the largest category was international students, followed by workers").

Is the UK unusual?

Audience research participants often said they wanted more international context. This included answers to questions such as whether the UK is 'disproportionately' popular as a destination for migrants and asylum seekers.

> The notion that we're in some way uniquely afflicted by this problem is a nonsense. *(External)*

<u>International comparisons can inform debates about what is 'normal'.</u> For example, political opinion on the Rwanda deal is divided. Some experts believe that BBC coverage has normalised a policy that was fundamentally unacceptable by talking about it in the same way it might discuss any other proposal. Others feel the BBC started from an overly critical perspective, describing the policy as though it was "bizarre".

One way to examine this conflict is to ask whether the policy is out of step with what other countries are doing. The short answer to this question is that quite a few high-income countries are looking for mechanisms to discourage unauthorised arrivals to claim asylum (*e.g.*, Italy, The Netherlands, Denmark, or Germany). The UK is not alone in what it is trying to accomplish, although the ways countries have tried to do this vary and the UK is towards the more radical end of the spectrum. That on its own is not enough to say whether UK policies are right or wrong, but it helps provide some broader context.

International comparisons are difficult to do well, however. Policies cannot always be transferred from one country to another, and they are often implemented in quite different ways. For example, proposals in other countries to process asylum applications overseas are sometimes described as 'UK-style' but there is a difference between the UK's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda and leave them there permanently, vs. proposals in some EU countries to *bring refugees back* to the country if their claims succeed.

Politicians and advocacy groups on all sides of the debate may prefer to downplay differences between countries, using the very existence of a similar-sounding policy elsewhere to support their platform. Few UK-based experts truly understand what other countries are actually doing. Accurate international comparisons will often require overseas

contributors who don't appear on the list of usual suspects for BBC programmes.

> There are things to learn from what other countries have done and so on. But, at the same time, those countries are often quite different, really. I suppose one example would be Australia's policy towards people trying to reach Australia by boat compared to the Channel. I think there's probably too much talk about Australia because to me it's a very, very different situation. […] I think in a small segment to bring out what is the same and what is different is quite a challenge, actually. *(External)*

International comparisons can be extremely valuable for audiences and the BBC should seek out more opportunities to use them. But journalists should also be aware that many UK contributors will lack the incentive or the expertise to draw out what matters about other countries' experiences. Proper comparisons will require a time investment.

Finally, BBC content could do more to explain the broader global context. This is also difficult to do well: global migration trends and policies are complicated. But sometimes this context is crucial.

For example, current UK asylum debates focus on the rights and wrongs of people crossing from France to the UK without permission. The context that sometimes gets lost is that:

- how countries like the UK, France and others share responsibility for refugees is complicated and contested. For example, asylum seekers arrive without permission because that is how the global asylum system works.

- many people think this global system is unfair—regardless of their perspectives on migration. Some argue it requires people to take dangerous journeys to access protection. Others argue it privileges the refugees who are willing and able to take dangerous journeys. Both of these things are true.

- while finding an alternative may be desirable, it is also logistically and diplomatically difficult.

Clearly this can't all be explained in every bulletin. But audiences might understand the challenges better if the BBC could mention some of these contested issues more often. In this case, global context can promote impartiality by enabling a more realistic understanding of what the UK policies can achieve unilaterally.

> [T]he other thing that I think would be useful to cover more… is to join up the dots with other countries and specifically give a bit of a more nuanced policy discussion about what's going on in the rest of Europe. […] And I think that that

Is there time for all this context?

Some programmes have a lot more time to cover a story than others. Journalists producing packages for the major news bulletins will often have 2½ minutes to cover a story. Online articles can in theory be relatively long, but in practice many readers will not get past the first few paragraphs. Radio allows a bit more space.

Some of the BBC journalists we spoke to suggested that while News inevitably faces constraints, the need for context and depth can be satisfied by longer-form programming. But is this convincing?

First, context will often only require a few sentences, or sometimes just a few words—for example, to mention the main countries asylum seekers come from, or explain that a large backlog of unprocessed asylum claims has made it necessary to find more asylum accommodation.

Second, if BBC coverage was less quick to examine every issue using a political lens, there would be more time to look at other ways of viewing the issue—economic, social, operational or ethical. Audience research participants often felt that stories framed exclusively around politics, particularly reports showing direct party political exchanges, did little to improve their understanding. Political framing will be a running theme in the rest of this report.

Political news is so often not about the bloody substance! It's about who's up and who's down or what did they mean by that or how this relates to an ongoing tension between two politicians or two departments or something. Which I think is really unsatisfactory because, actually, this stuff should be covered on the basis of the substance. (*External*)

Many BBC journalists agreed:

Sometimes it's appropriate to look at migration through the prism of the Westminster political drama: big announcement from the government, Opposition goes on the attack, will it shift the polls? I get it. Sometimes we have to talk about that. But actually, sometimes—perhaps more often than not—the starting point isn't political. […] The starting point for a migration story is the impact on the people who are involved in immigration or who are affected by immigration in this country and the analysis of the policies and numbers around the story. (*Internal*)

Third, the news coverage we reviewed was often repetitive. Audience research participants felt they learned little from some types of content, especially on frequently covered topics such as small boat arrivals.

Journalists cannot address the whole issue in depth when they only have a couple of minutes, but they can try to tell regular audiences at least one thing they didn't already know. For example, coverage could tackle some of audiences' unanswered questions, instead of repeatedly explaining the headline small boats numbers. Why is it mostly men? How do people raise the money to pay the smugglers? Why did India briefly become one of the top countries of origin for people crossing in small boats?

Fourth, there are excellent examples of short-form content that do provide depth on one specific issue. For example, Lucy Williamson's 2½-minute package on why people were leaving Albania for the UK (see p.12) received high praise from audiences in our research, despite its short format (BBC One and News Channel, 2 November 2022).

> I would say nonsense and fiddlesticks to the idea that there isn't time in a bulletin! […] The idea that you can't do contextual background packages in a programme that's almost half-an-hour long is baloney. (*External*)

Finally, lack of context or depth doesn't only afflict the shortest formats. It has also been a significant problem in Online coverage. Where Online stories drew heavily on specialists—often because of a particularly high-profile development—they usually did provide sufficient background. The website has used helpful 'Analysis' boxes from specialist correspondents (although these appear to have become less common outside 'Live' pages which have a shorter shelf life).

The 'smaller' migration-related developments have sometimes been covered quite superficially online, however. Examples of smaller stories include daily or monthly small boat statistics on small boat crossings, minor rule changes (*e.g.*, to the Shortage Occupation List – see p.64) or miscellaneous comments from politicians or other high-profile people.

In other words, it's possible to do depth even within the constraints of the current formats. But that's not to say these constraints should be taken as given. If the BBC wants to improve its ability to explain and analyse topics like migration impartially, it could also consider more radical approaches. Some BBC journalists we spoke to argued that the organisation should reconsider how time is allocated to different stories to allow some more space, including in TV news. Section 10 discusses this further (p.65).

06:37

All groups in the audience research appreciated Lucy Williamson's report on why people were leaving Albania for the UK in 2022.

4. INTERROGATING CLAIMS

Political debates are full of empirical claims. Some claims are about the past, some about the future. Claims about the future are much more speculative, but journalists can still scrutinise the evidence behind them (or the lack of it).

Scrutiny of political claims in BBC coverage is sometimes insufficient—whether the claims come from politicians, advocacy groups, business or others. Some coverage robustly challenged questionable statements, particularly when it was led by senior specialists with the confidence and knowledge to do so. Some coverage did not.

There was no obvious bias in the failure to scrutinise claims. The problem affects claims on all sides of the debate. The underlying problem seems to stem from BBC journalists' lack of confidence, time or (in some cases) expertise to do it.

Both sides-ism

Coverage often pits opposing views against each other without really interrogating either. "The Rwanda policy will save lives and break the business model of the people smugglers," one contributor might say. "Rwanda is unworkable: only safe and legal routes will end the small boat crossings," another might respond. End of story.

But audiences need more information to judge these arguments. Is it really possible for asylum deterrence policies such as the Rwanda deal to save lives? Would safe and legal routes actually reduce the incentive for migrants and refugees to enter the UK without authorisation? If the Rwanda policy is unworkable, which aspect of it will not work?

The BBC journalists we spoke to widely agreed that explaining and challenging political claims was important.

> I feel like I hear a diversity of opinions on immigration in BBC output. What I don't feel I hear is enough stress-testing of those opinions. I don't just want to hear that someone thinks something. I want to explore the reasons why they think that, and I want to explore how their perception of the world and their perception of the issue marries with what's actually happening. (*Internal*)

Even when there are no empirically provable answers, the BBC can still scrutinise the evidence available. This will usually mean going beyond politicians to external experts.

Simply reporting political claims without interrogating them risks giving undue weight to weak arguments. For example, in September 2023, the BBC reported government ministers claiming that Labour's proposal for an

asylum deal with the EU would mean the UK would have to accept 100,000 asylum seekers from Europe.

This claim is incorrect. First, it is based on the assumption that the EU has a policy of equalising asylum seeker numbers across Europe (and thus by extension the UK, if the UK joined a deal). No such policy exists.[*] Second, even if the policy did exist, the claim was based on a mathematical error because it did not take into account the 90,000 asylum seekers the UK already received.

Nonetheless, the BBC reported the claim prominently. For example, an Online story led with the 100,000 claim and then noted that Labour rejected it. Readers would be forgiven for assuming that this was a legitimate difference of opinion.

The second half of the article, entitled "Would the UK take 100,000 migrants a year from the EU under Labour?" (see next page) looked like it would address whether the claim was true. Better late than never, though this is arguably too late in the story: fact checking should be central to the reporting, not an add-on many readers won't get to. However, this section started by repeating the incorrect calculation, almost validating the idea that it made any sense at all. Audiences would have to read quite carefully between the lines to see that the claim was incorrect.

<u>The core problem here is that the BBC provided 'balance' in the narrow sense by reporting two opposing opinions on something that was not a matter of opinion. This is an impartiality risk</u>.

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[*] EU policy includes a relocation mechanism that a) is not mandatory for participating countries and b) does not mean equalising numbers across countries – the figures involved are much smaller.

Would the UK take 100,000 migrants a year from the EU under Labour?

The Conservatives' **claim that Labour would let in 100,000 illegal migrants to the EU every year** assumes Sir Keir's party would sign up to taking 13% of all asylum seekers who arrive in the EU.

They say this is because the EU has a policy of sharing asylum seekers between countries, based on population size. About one million arrive in the EU each year.

The UK's population is just under 13% of the EU's total, so this would mean taking well over 100,000 asylum seekers.

However, although the EU has been negotiating for years on how to share responsibility for refugees arriving via the Mediterranean, no deal based on population is in place.

In 2015, when refugee numbers peaked in Europe, the UK was still an EU member state, but did not take part in an EU-wide response as it had an opt-out.

Labour has now said it would not - and could not - sign up to an EU quota scheme because the UK is not a member state, so any agreement would have to be outside that.

BBC VERIFY

A September 2023 fact check reporting opposing opinions without being sufficiently clear that one of them was incorrect

Not all cases will be so cut and dried. Often there will be legitimate arguments on either side. But the principle is the same: the BBC must be willing to dig into *why* contributors are making their arguments and what basis they have for them. Some coverage already does this very well. This is an impartiality issue, because audiences require this analysis in order to evaluate political claims properly.

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One of the less cut-and-dried examples is 'safe and legal routes' for people seeking protection in the UK. Politicians and advocacy organisations sometimes argue that safe and legal routes can prevent small boat crossings. One BBC journalist argued that the BBC had not done enough to interrogate this claim:

> What does "safe and legal routes" mean? How many people are we talking about? And what's the impact of those who get refused their safe and legal route? There is a plausible scenario where you end up with exactly the same situation as before, except with higher numbers and many of those being brought in legally. But we—as an organisation, as the BBC—seem to think that there is a safe and legal routes solution to small boats that makes the problem go away and we never analyse what safe and legal routes means. I find that frustrating. (*Internal*)

Indeed, some types of safe and legal routes are more likely than others to mean fewer refugees arriving without permission. People with family members in the UK may have a strong reason to come here rather than elsewhere, and so visas targeted at them might have some impact on small boat crossings (though it's hard to know how much and the evidence is incomplete). But many other types of safe and legal routes, such as expanding standard UN resettlement programmes, would likely have no meaningful impact on unauthorised migration even if they have merits in their own right. <u>Impartial coverage should explain both the benefits and the limits of these and other policy proposals</u>.

Our research suggested that audiences had an appetite for a bit more substance on issues such as these. How does the UN actually select refugees for resettlement by the UN, for example, and are they the same people who would have crossed in small boats? (Mostly, no.) How do migrants and refugees decide where to move, including when they have family in the UK? What happened in other countries that introduced safe and legal routes, such as the United States?

Finally, fully interrogating political claims may help the BBC to avoid presenting an overly polarised picture of the arguments. Once journalists get past the soundbites to look at the details, they will usually find that the picture is more nuanced.

> Issues to do with refugees and migrants are discussed in a very polarised way and in a very obviously uncomplicated way: "There's too many," "We should welcome everybody," are the kind of extremes, aren't they, that we see. (*External*)
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> I think acknowledging that there're shades of grey is a better way to start from it rather than here's a couple of polar views on it and let's get them to have a fiery clash and then everyone leaves feeling frustrated, unilluminated and annoyed. (*Internal*)

Numbers

<u>The healthy scepticism BBC journalists should apply to political claims also applies to numbers</u>. While the BBC has many highly numerate reporters, some journalists appear to lack the confidence to challenge numerical claims or check they are reliable.

A high-profile example took place in the run-up to the official net migration statistics release in May 2023. Following other media outlets' lead, the BBC widely reported claims that net migration was 'likely' to reach either 700,000 or 1 million.

The original source was a think tank paper that produced five back-of-the-envelope scenarios for net migration in 2022. The 700,000 and 1 million figures were the highest of the five. As chance would have it, the 700,000 was plausible and turned out to be relatively close to the revised figure of 745,000 later published by ONS in November 2023.

The 1 million figure was not plausible for 2022 because it was based on an unrealistic scenario of emigration dropping for no obvious reason.[*] Migration statistics experts could have explained this, had BBC journalists decided to call them. But—following other media outlets—the BBC widely reported the 1 million without challenge, and often without attribution. This was a readily avoidable impartiality risk.

> What I would hope is that when someone suggests a million, there's someone in the BBC who knows enough about the stats to start questioning it asking, "Where does that come from? How did you arrive at that number?" Perhaps trying to triangulate by asking other people, "Do you find that number plausible?" and so on. And, in that particular case, I don't think it should have really had much airtime because I don't think it had much credibility. *(External)*

The BBC has in-house data specialists who can advise journalists, and sensible editorial guidelines that encourage them to dig into statistical sources and assess their credibility just as they would for other information. The guidelines are not always followed.

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[*] Technical point: BBC journalists sometimes create the impression that emigration is independent of immigration. It isn't. Emigration mostly depends on how many people immigrated a few years previously.

> I think the big thing is number confidence. It's people being excluded from doing normal journalistic interrogation because they feel that this is really hard or really unarguable because it's a number. (*Internal*)

Risk and resources

Some parts of the BBC do an excellent job of assessing, or even demolishing, political claims. They illustrate how assertive, factual analysis of dodgy claims can bolster impartiality. For example, Ros Atkins' explainers often interrogate controversial claims while attracting very few complaints from either side. (In our audience research, participants praised Atkins' June 2022 explainer on Rwanda for its clear and impartial approach, exploring several different viewpoints.)

We saw several examples of robust but evidence-based challenge, particularly content from specialists, BBC Verify and also in Long Form Audio. BBC Verify's clear and factual response to the government's claim that it had cleared the 'legacy' asylum backlog by the end of 2022 is one such case ([2 January 2024](#)).

Journalists need confidence to interrogate political claims. Simply reporting what people have said may feel safer, especially for people who are new to the topic of migration.

The bigger challenge is capacity and expertise, however. Reporting what people have said is easier and faster than spending time getting to the bottom of their claims. Resources are limited. Confidently challenging weak arguments often requires either subject-specific expertise or hours of work, and there is pressure to get stories out quickly.

The challenge for the BBC is thus not only to ensure that journalists have the confidence to analyse political claims assertively, but also to ensure they have the resources and subject-specific expertise to do it. This challenge will become all the more important as the UK general election approaches.

5. UNTOLD STORIES

The BBC could tell a wider range of migration stories. Story selection is an impartiality issue because the BBC's cumulative choices paint a picture for audiences about which topics matter and where the 'problems' are. Even if the BBC tells the stories it covers perfectly impartially, it might fall short if some stories are not told at all.

BBC journalists often told us they found some topics easier or safer to cover than others. Easier if the story required less digging. Safer if they wouldn't be criticised for covering it. At the top of the list of easy, safe stories were political announcements, government statistics, things high-profile people have said, and things that other media outlets had already reported.

Many of these stories are perfectly worthwhile. Politicians have asked to be held accountable for their efforts to 'stop the boats', for example. Numerous political announcements and parliamentary debates have focused on this topic. So it is quite reasonable for the BBC to cover it extensively. It did: a substantial share of all stories in 2022 and 2023 focused on small boats and asylum.

But both BBC journalists and external experts (regardless of their views on migration) questioned whether the BBC was *too* readily led by the political agenda, which focused heavily on small boats during the review period.

> There are times when it's so obvious the government is literally saying to the pol corrs, 'This is what we want to talk about this week.' And then we do! (*Internal*)

Relying too heavily on political and government sources risks missing stories politicians don't have an interest in talking about.

By early 2023, it was clear that unprecedented numbers of people were coming to the UK on work visas, particularly for care work. By the spring, evidence started to emerge that some care workers faced appalling conditions in the UK, working for employers who were violating labour and immigration rules. This has arguably been one of the most striking migration developments in the UK over the past five years.

File on 4 (BBC Radio 4) did an excellent, in-depth investigation of modern slavery in the care sector in July 2023, and further reporting on exploitation emerged from October onwards. But otherwise BBC coverage of care work migration was limited until it became *such* a big issue that politicians finally started to talk about it.

The BBC could be bolder to commission content on topics that politicians aren't (yet) talking about but that specialists and experts on the ground know about.

> I think there is an ongoing issue within the BBC which is about we want to hear ground-up voices but a lot of our resources are focused on the politics. And I think over the years we have got better at making sure we're hearing on the ground voices within those political pieces. But the stories start from the ground. They don't start necessarily in Westminster and Millbank. (*Internal*)

What is missing?

BBC coverage is very focused on the moment of migrants' *arrival—i.e.*, how people get to the UK or the visas they hold. Other parts of the migration journey get less attention, especially in Network coverage. Audience research participants felt this too: they wanted to know what happened before, including the motivations for migration, and what happened next, including how migrants settle in and how migration affects the UK.

Nations and English Regions coverage often did have a slightly broader focus, and audiences appreciated the 'on the ground' insights this coverage brought.

> I think all the issues of integration and citizenship get kind of overlooked because they're not contested politically. (*External*)
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> Things like family migration actually get very little coverage because they don't really have lobby groups behind them in the same way as business, work and students do. And so perhaps we hear a bit less about that than we should do. (*External*)

The biggest single topic audience research participants wanted to hear more about was the social and economic impacts of migration. That is, how migration affects public services, the labour market, housing, communities or crime. These topics were often the priority for people who were concerned about levels of migration, but not exclusively. Many thought positives about migration were under-reported, such as migrants' contributions to the labour market.

> I think it needs to be looked at in terms of the positives and also not just the high politics of it, but what it actually means for the economy—the national economy, the Scottish economy, regional economies as well. And I don't think we really see very much of what happens when people come to this country. What do they do? There're superb stories to be told about that. (*External*)

Audience research participants of all persuasions agreed they should hear more about these longer-term impacts, both positive and negative. Indeed, they often judged impartiality based on their perception of whether it had dealt with both benefits and costs fairly.

Immigration is rarely the only thing that affects the things people care about, whether that is public services, housing, social cohesion or something else. It will often make sense to cover immigration as one part of a broader story, rather than focusing exclusively on immigration. A good example of this in practice was a December 2023 edition of BBC Radio 4's *The Briefing Room* looking at several factors contributing to rising homelessness—one of which was asylum accommodation contractors competing to secure low-cost housing.

The coverage we reviewed also included only limited discussion of migration's social and cultural impacts. Where this topic did arise, it was often covered relatively superficially—for example, a brief mention in a political debate panel or the occasional vox pop. Several BBC journalists thought coverage could do more to get under the skin of different communities' views on how migration had affected daily life.

> I think the voices that are missed are people who go about their daily lives and are not intrinsically politically extremist or anything like that, but who have seen their communities completely transformed very, very quickly. [I]t's the speed of change that people don't like and can't cope with. (*External*)
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> It's very important, I think, to just remind the country that people have come to our country as refugees and have made huge contributions… Those are really important stories, and I'm not sure they get quite enough airtime. (*External*)

Covering topics like this will mean more focus on managed migration, not just asylum. The scale of migration through the visa system in recent years has been around ten times higher than the number of people claiming asylum. You wouldn't always know this from the coverage.

In fact, after seeing a range of clips from across BBC content, audience research participants were quite surprised to learn from one of them that small boat arrivals made up only a few percent of immigration. However, the socio-economic impacts of migration will be driven by all types of migration, not just the minority arriving in small boats. Impartial coverage must reflect this reality accurately.

> [O]ther than when we get the figures released for legal migration, in between the days those figures are released, there is no debate at all about this. And yet, in terms of the impact on people's lives, it is much, much more significant. (*External*)

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> I'm not conscious that you would get from BBC coverage much of a sense that, actually, illegal migration is a small part of what is causing social change in this country. […] The huge numbers that we're having now… I'm not sure that gets enough context on the BBC. (*External*)

Audience research participants who were migrants themselves often pointed out that overall, the portrayal of migrants across BBC coverage was not very representative of the broader migrant population. Widening the topics to include more discussion of legal migration and settled communities might help address this valid concern.

> Some migrant participants [in the audience research] wanted to see greater nuance in the portrayal of migrants in the news generally, feeling that migrants could often be depicted mainly as a group of people coming off small boats, or as casual or manual workers, with less portrayal of migrants being skilled, educated or professionally qualified. (*Jigsaw audience research*)

Several other interesting areas of migration that are not salient politically have received little attention. Some examples include:

- *Emigration*. The contribution of net migration to population growth depends crucially on emigration, not just immigration. In the past, most migrants in the UK have left within a few years, making emigration a big part of the UK's migration story. People who are no longer in the UK are of course harder to find. But the BBC has correspondents in many other countries—and indeed there are a few excellent examples of BBC coverage interviewing migrants who had returned home (*e.g.*, in Albania).

- *How immigration rules work and how they affect people*. The large increase in visa fees announced in July 2023, for example, is expected to have a big impact on migrants, their families and their employers. While asylum has received much attention, the drivers and human consequences of problems such as the asylum backlog have seen much less coverage.

- *Routes to claiming asylum other than small boats*. Home Office statistics suggest that most asylum applicants over the past year did not arrive by small boat. Some will have come on visas (*e.g.*, for study or seasonal work), others will have arrived by air with genuine or false documentation and others will have chosen different unauthorised routes.

- *Integration*. Integration is a long-term process featuring both newcomers and resident communities. It has many dimensions,

economic and social.* Integration doesn't always have an immediate news hook, although anniversaries of events triggering emigration can provide a lens to examine how people settle in long-term (*e.g.*, for migrants from Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Ugandan Asians or the Windrush generation). The audience research found widespread demand for more coverage of integration.

> Across sample groups, participants expressed interest in hearing about long term integration into the UK in order to understand the impact and outcome of migration. For some, this was a desire to celebrate success stories and emphasise perceived positive contribution; others wanted to see recognition of some of the perceived challenges. (*Jigsaw audience research*)

Stories like these are still *relevant* to current political debates; they just tend not to make it into political speeches. Some of them require more digging to tell. But when the BBC does dig up stories like these, they tend to be very engaging. For example, less commonly reported topics audience research participants appreciated hearing about included international students; the people-smuggling industry; a deportation programme for Albanian citizens with criminal records; modern slavery in the construction sector; and industry-specific stories on demand for migrant workers.

If there is any concern that audiences lack appetite for this kind of depth, our audience research did not back it up. In fact, these different stories bolster impartiality by reflecting a wider range of interests and experience than daily political news stories tend to do.

> I think it is about going and finding those stories and talking to real people about their experience of how the immigration system actually impacts on them and their communities and their families and so on. (*Internal*)

Difficult topics

For the most part, story selection appeared to be driven not by deliberate choices to cover or not cover certain topics, but by the culture of following the political agenda.

However, some BBC journalists said that some stories felt more risky to cover, particularly if the topics could appear unsympathetic to migrants or migration. One BBC journalist also said that if it was seen as "not a nice story" it was less likely to be promoted across other BBC outlets or reposted on social media.

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* Topics that fall under the broad area of integration include social connections between migrants and other local residents, acquisition of citizenship, language learning, how people do in the labour market, or children of migrants' school education.

Stories about immigration fraud had created some anxiety, for example. Some BBC journalists embarking on these stories said they had encountered criticism from colleagues who felt it was "not a story you should be looking at". In all the cases we were aware of, though, the stories went ahead.

It is possible to cover stories like immigration fraud in a factual and nuanced way, without demonising migrants, however. One such example was the May 2023 *Newsnight* investigation into how pregnant women living in the UK without authorisation had paid British men to pose as fathers so their children could become British. This piece exposed the fraud that was occurring while also reflecting the experience of the women involved respectfully.

One BBC journalist put it well:

> We should be able to explain the reasons that [migrants'] experiences happen as they do while respecting their experience. I don't believe that a vigorous approach to explaining the practicalities, the problems, the benefits of one system or policy or another, should stop us doing that for fear of not being respectful of the people affected. We should simply make sure that we *are* respectful of the people affected. I don't believe it's a choice. (*Internal*)

Some BBC journalists said that colleagues sometimes shied away from stories in which migration was having a negative impact on communities, such as areas where hotels that were at the heart of the local business community had closed in order to house asylum seekers.

> One of the problems is we all want to seem like we're nice, caring people and it is far easier to care for things in the context of migration, in terms of people coming in, and not necessarily caring in terms of the communities in which they have an impact. (*Internal*)

Again, there were good examples of this topic being covered respectfully, reflecting views from local businesses, residents and asylum seekers about the impacts of locating asylum hotels in particular areas. These were often but not exclusively in the English Regions.

It is not racist to be concerned about the impacts of migration or to prefer more restrictive policies. This becomes clear when coverage gives such views sufficient depth. Indeed, depth is the friend of impartiality when it comes to topics that might appear 'difficult' at first glance. Often, issues that look like they lend themselves to a particular view on migration—positive or negative—turn out to be more nuanced when they are explored in depth (see some examples on p.12).

How can the BBC broaden story selection?

When the BBC puts in the resources, it can produce great coverage on engaging stories. One thing that came out loud and clear from the audience research was that people wanted to learn something new. They enthusiastically received investigations into topics such as people smuggling or deportation. It doesn't require a half-hour documentary—one of the most popular clips in the audience research was 2½ minutes long.

What are the barriers?

Some BBC journalists recognised the critique that story selection was a bit narrow but argued that the news is the news. They can't go around reporting things that aren't really news just for the sake of covering more topics, we were told.

That said, some of the political stories that get covered are more newsworthy than others. There were plenty of examples of repetitive coverage that could probably have been dropped in favour of something a bit more interesting.

> Particularly in daily news coverage, particularly over the last 15 years or so, we've been utterly dominated by the Westminster news cycle. So the Newsroom takes so many of its daily cues from what's coming out of Westminster politics […]. And [we will be told], "Millbank are deploying on A, B, C, D stories". And I'm sitting there thinking, "Well, C and D aren't really stories. They're just things that politicians are doing today." (*Internal*)

Is the threshold for considering political stories newsworthy too low and/or is the threshold for considering 'on the ground' ones newsworthy too high? This review can't confidently answer that question as it's hard to review stories that didn't happen. But it's worth asking.

> I think there would also need to be a shift in attitudes, really, to make sure those stories get on—to recognise that sometimes the human stories on the ground […] today, they may not sound that significant. Tomorrow, they may be *really* significant. (*Internal*)

Of course, the BBC cannot ignore what everyone else is talking about. Often the stories that politicians want to talk about or that other media outlets cover will be important. In fact, newspapers arguably covered a more creative selection of migration topics during the review period. But front-page stories in other outlets can also be the product of hype and speculation. The BBC should have the confidence to make independent judgments about what is news.

Across its coverage, BBC journalists find it perfectly possible to justify reporting stories using pegs such as "the BBC has learned", or "according

to previously unreported data". In other cases, journalists can weave under-covered subjects into more familiar ones—for example, quarterly official statistics releases.

> In the Newsroom it's all about a hard top news line. It's all they want to care about: is there a news line, is there a news line, is there a news line? I think we've got to think a bit differently and think, 'What does our audience think about what is a news line? Do they even know what a news line is?' Probably not. (*Internal*)

Indeed, audiences did not seem too concerned about whether something had a news line. What they wanted was interesting coverage that told them something they didn't already know. They also wanted to deepen their understanding of the topic beyond just the latest events.

The BBC may need to think more deliberately about story selection, to make sure it is commissioning a broad range of content that goes beyond the daily political news cycle. For example, some BBC journalists suggested that there should be better ways for specialists to feed in what they're hearing on the ground, or to bring editorial and front-line reporters together to tease out the issues that need to be addressed over the medium term.

> Regardless of what's happening on the daily political news cycle, there should be space for editors to say to [specialists], "What is it we're missing on this topic? What is the new way into it? Come up with two ideas, right, and then we'll fund them, we'll put cash into them to make them happen." And I think that would help because I think we'd probably end up actually long term getting better stories out of it. But that takes resources and time and freeing people up to do it. (*Internal*)

BBC teams do not always have the resources to take reporters off their ordinary duties to produce more investigative content. As one journalist put it:

> It feels often like you have to do the work that you've been given and there isn't this time to explore and dig and find great stories, or haven't got the chance to find out what's happening in Humberside or South Wales or whatever. But there's definitely a tendency to cover what Westminster is saying, and it's harder to get out into the regions to find specific stories. (*Internal*)

The resource question goes well beyond migration coverage and it is up to the BBC to decide how to deal with this within its budget constraints. The challenge, however, is clear: broad impartiality requires journalists to have the space to get out ahead of the Westminster-driven news agenda and select stories more creatively. When they have had the resources to do this, the results have been good.

Finally, it would be useful for BBC coverage to be transparent about the editorial choices involved. Participants in the audience research often wanted to know *why* the BBC was focusing on a particular story, especially where they felt the topic lent itself to a negative or positive view on migration.

> The research indicated that demonstrating impartiality could be supported further by including, where appropriate, explicit explanation of editorial choices in reporting. […] Specifically, this meant explaining why a report had chosen to focus on a particular issue or area, why a report was framing a story or issue in a particular way, and also ensuring that the given story in focus was situated in its wider context. (*Jigsaw audience research*)

In some cases, the BBC uses a series of programmes to address different aspects of a migration issue. This can be helpful as it helps create space to explore each aspect in detail while also explaining to audiences why a given broadcast focuses on one particular sub-topic. Drawing audiences' attention to this and providing links to related content may help make editorial choices more transparent.

6. DIVERSITY OF OPINION

<u>Impartial coverage should reflect and represent the wide range of perspectives that audiences, politicians and experts have on migration</u>. Our audience research showed that people wanted to hear from all sides even if they might disagree with them.

Most BBC content did reflect a range of perspectives. However, some perspectives seemed more likely to get superficial treatment or no treatment at all. These omissions did not lean in one direction only. The review found no evidence of a systematic liberal or sceptical (or pro-government) bias in the coverage itself. For example, the BBC could do a better job reflecting perspectives and experiences of both migrants themselves *and* those who advocate more restrictive policies towards migration.

The need to reflect all relevant perspectives fully is in part an extension of the challenge discussed in the previous section: depth and explanation. One BBC journalist raised this concern:

> Rather than sort of swooping in when the story's big and hovering for a little while then going away again, do we get under the skin of the story to understand both sides of it sufficiently to understand the lives of the people who are taking the risks and undertaking the journey, risking their lives and the lives of their families? Do we really get close enough to that? And do we get close enough to the lives of those who would say that their illegal migration causes problems for us in our communities, what it actually means for the schools and social services and what's it like to live in those places that are impacted? (*Internal*)

There is a risk coverage does not always meet this high standard, as this section will outline. But first it is worth a brief detour to ask what audiences thought.

Did audiences find BBC coverage impartial?

<u>Audiences typically found BBC *presenters and correspondents* themselves to be impartial, in our audience research</u>. They usually did not feel that they could guess what the presenter thought from what they had said on air.

When assessing individual clips from BBC content, audience views were mixed. Some research participants commended the BBC for producing impartial content, while others felt some perspectives didn't get enough weight.

Critiques leaned in both directions and were not always predictable based on people's pre-existing views about migration. Indeed, the participants

in our audience research were less polarised than the external experts we spoke to.

For example, participants felt that certain items leaned towards sceptical perspectives by giving great weight to government arguments and failing to mention any positive impacts of migration. They felt that other items leaned towards a liberal perspective by focusing on difficulties migrants faced (*e.g.*, finding suitable housing), without enough recognition that other people in the UK population also faced these problems. Some felt the BBC had not reported enough positive impacts of government policies, particularly the Rwanda deal.

When audience research participants were asked to assess *all* the BBC content they had seen in the round—about 12 pieces each—many felt coverage was largely negative, framing migration as a problem. They did not come away from the coverage feeling that the BBC had portrayed migration itself as a positive phenomenon—even if they also thought that the challenges migration brings should receive more attention.

This partly results from the nature of news, which often focuses on problems. The content used in the audience research was designed to be broadly representative of BBC coverage on migration, and so included quite a few small boats and asylum stories. Public attitudes are generally less positive towards these types of migration than others. An external expert also pointed out the resulting risk:

> I think there's a tendency—and it's true of migration policy too—to focus on those aspects of migration which are much more problematic or challenging. So, all the positive elements of migration, the successes of migration, the significant economic and other contributions that migrants make are really not reported. What is not reported, in a way, is as important as what is reported in terms of impartiality. If you're only reporting what is perceived to be the negative, then that's a pretty partial or biased representation of migration. (*External*)

One partial exception to this trend was Nations and Regions coverage, which occasionally included stories about the achievements of specific migrants or refugees who had settled locally.

Sceptical views on migration

Sceptical views about migration were aired extensively in BBC coverage, but coverage of these views often needed more depth.

One reason coverage has been extensive is that BBC journalism is often led by what politicians are saying. The current government and its recent Home Secretaries have taken comparatively restrictive positions—at least on asylum, if not always on legal migration. Coverage routinely includes clips of ministers arguing for more restrictive policies, while BBC

correspondents explain the government's rationale for restrictions. Political debate programmes in particular do not seem to have had much trouble getting people on air to discuss the downsides of migration.

Indeed, some external experts felt that the BBC was constantly hammering home the government message.

> All too often, these [government] press releases are quite simply read out as news—on the headlines, on the website. And, even where balance is sought and expert voices are sought, which is not always the case, it simply means that the government leads the conversation, is on the front foot of the conversation about migrants' rights at all times. And week on week on week on week and even day on day, we simply hear, 'The government says this about migration today, the government says this about small boats today.' (*External*)

Nonetheless, coverage of sceptical views on migration was sometimes superficial, and did not always fully explain *why and how* migration can bring challenges. One reason was that this coverage often drew primarily on politicians and commentators; by contrast, coverage exploring liberal views appeared more likely to draw on contributors with on the ground expertise. There is thus a risk that concerns about migration are voiced through political commentary and vox pops, while liberal perspectives get more detailed analysis.

The challenge for the BBC is that many of the people with on the ground knowledge of migration issues also hold liberal views. They include many immigration lawyers, charity representatives and academics, among others.

BBC journalists often said finding people with first-hand expertise to unpack sceptical arguments on migration was difficult. Not all agreed about whether this problem could be resolved. But some BBC journalists felt that they and their colleagues could do more to find the right guests.

> I do think we need to work harder at it and sometimes maybe it is just a case of thinking it through more in advance. And a news cycle doesn't always make that possible. But perhaps we should actually, as an organisation, spend some time looking at the people who we can go to so we know that there are other voices in this debate. (*Internal*)

It may be possible to think more creatively about what proponents of sceptical viewpoints look like. Guests often do not fit neatly into liberal vs. sceptical boxes. Some academics, for example, are liberal on family migration but sceptical about work migration. Local authority representatives or service providers are often well-placed to discuss local pressures migration can bring. Journalists need to consider who can best explain a given *viewpoint*, not just whether the guest can be labelled as a sceptic.

We have to be realistic about the time pressures journalists face when booking guests: some programmes have more time than others to identify the right people. Identifying suitable contributors will be much easier for journalists with subject-specific expertise—as with so many of the challenges discussed in this report.

If the BBC can start telling a broader range of migration stories—as discussed in the previous section—it may become easier to explore concerns about migration in depth. Coverage that focuses primarily on political debate naturally has less space to explore the challenges themselves and how different UK communities experience them.

Labour shortages and the economy

Coverage of labour shortages has sometimes been one-sided, creating the impression that the only solution is migration. For example, BBC coverage sometimes uses the language of 'need' in a misleading way (*e.g.*, "the people the economy needs").

Last year's thematic review of UK public finances identified a similar problem. Talking about economic 'needs' may give the impression that liberal policies on work migration are obviously a good idea and that there are no alternatives. But there will always be trade-offs.

The alternative to work migration that gets the most airtime is paying local workers more. Employers arguing for more liberal migration policies are often pressed on why they can't attract local workers into jobs. In some cases, however, BBC correspondents amplified rather than challenged employers' views, asking softball questions along the lines of "Why do you think the government isn't acting faster to meet business demands for more migration?"

Other drawbacks of work-related migration are perhaps just as important but emerge less often. They include a) that work-visa programmes in low-wage jobs present a high risk of worker exploitation and b) that easy access to overseas workers may reduce incentives to automate. These are admittedly nuanced points that cannot make it into every 2½-minute package. But they should be explored more often than they currently are.

> Participants could feel that, by reporting on the role of migration to the UK in alleviating labour shortages, some reports tested in the research appeared to present migration as the main solution. […] Some participants also wanted more details on what employers were paying staff when they were unable to find enough workers, in order to judge whether terms and conditions may have been a barrier to recruiting UK-based workers. (*Jigsaw audience research*)

More broadly, coverage can sometimes exaggerate the impacts of work-related migration. Occasionally there is a lot at stake, such as in health

and social care. But in many other sectors, the impacts of admitting people on work visas will be small.[*]

Contributors will often present more polarised views. One side tells us the economy will collapse without migration and the other tells us migration will create untold damage. <u>The view that receives more support from the research—and deserves more attention—is that the overall economic impacts are not as big (positive or negative) as the most ardent voices claim</u>.

Impartial coverage requires us to hear some of these more nuanced arguments on the economics of migration. To do this, the BBC will need to move beyond its usual suspect contributors.

Migrants' perspectives

<u>Many BBC stories include no migrant voice or perspective</u>. In other areas of storytelling, there is almost a convention that journalists begin with a 'human interest' perspective from someone at the sharp end of the policy. Migration appears to be an exception.

> If a story is about them, they need to be part of that. It's the same if you do a story about women's rights, you can't have just a group of men talking about women's rights. You'd have a woman talking, 'This affects me.' So what I would ask is to treat us [*i.e.*, migrants] equally the same like you treat other subjects where you wouldn't do a story without them. (*External*)

Longer-form programming did routinely include migrants' perspectives and voices. However, the fact that *Panorama* did a good job of including all relevant perspectives does not let daily news programmes off the hook. A lot more people watch the news.

> If there are no refugee and migrant voices in those short pieces, then I think there's a real problem because most people are not going to hear those voices. […] You can't just go to academics or go to refugees and migrants when you've got a longer piece. I think they need to be in the more day-to-day reporting to give a bit more diversity of views on these issues. (*External*)

<u>The lack of migrant voices and perspectives increases the risk that coverage will lose sight of the human lives behind the statistics</u>. Migrants have specific expertise that helps audiences understand migration stories.

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[*] One reason is that there is no fixed number of jobs that must be filled either by new migrants or the domestic population. A relatively mainstream viewpoint among economists that rarely makes its way into media coverage is that some of the jobs do not need to exist at all. There is no optimal number of raspberries or lattes the UK must produce. If sectors relying on low-wage workers grow more slowly or even shrink in the short run, it is not good for business owners in those sectors but it won't necessarily have a big impact on the UK economy.

For example, they have direct experience of making migration decisions and being subject to immigration policies. Some, such as refugees, will have had life experiences that are radically different from the average migration expert or BBC audience member. As a result, their perspectives will sometimes be surprising or counter-intuitive to UK audiences. Their views and experiences will also vary widely (and not all have liberal views on migration).

Some BBC journalists felt that just as the BBC was nervous about taking on stories that could be perceived as negative about migration, it also shied away from hearing migrants' perspectives for fear of appearing too sympathetic to them.

> I think that we need to be really careful that we don't dehumanise the migrants who arrive. (*Internal*)

Hearing from migrants is perfectly compatible with impartial coverage, however. <u>Impartial coverage should be able to demonstrate empathy *both* with the people who have migrated and *also* with UK residents who are worried about migration</u>.

As with any other area of coverage, the BBC should not *privilege* any one perspective. A handful of pieces of content we reviewed drew almost exclusively on migrant contributors. This can be problematic, since properly examining an issue will typically require other forms of expertise, too. As noted earlier (p.16), migrants are not usually experts in immigration law or policy (though some are, of course). Audiences need to know not just how migrants experienced a given policy, for example, but also why that policy exists and what it aimed to achieve.

Audience research participants agreed. They did not necessarily want coverage to draw *only* on migrant contributors. Indeed, participants who were migrants themselves were sensitive to this risk too. But a striking finding from the audience research was that, regardless of people's views on migration, they wanted to hear directly from migrants themselves. They generally agreed that migrants' perspectives and voices were under-represented in short-form content. This is an impartiality risk. Indeed, some of the coverage that fared best with a broad range of audience research participants heard migrants' views *alongside* other perspectives.

However, some BBC journalists said they struggled to secure migrant contributors, who were often reluctant to talk. Journalists found it particularly difficult to secure guests who were directly involved in a particular story (*e.g.*, asylum seekers living in a specific hotel).

Unlike politicians and think tankers, ordinary people—including migrants—are busy living their lives and can't always be summoned at two hours'

notice to respond to breaking news. They may be worried about putting themselves forward. Contact with migrant contributors will often need to be brokered by charities, who may also be reluctant to put people forward at short notice if they do not have an existing relationship with the journalist. There can also be safeguarding concerns.

Some external stakeholders thought that <u>the BBC could get over these barriers by putting in the legwork ahead of time</u>, however. One argued that other broadcasters had done more to build relationships with migrant contributors in advance. Some internal stakeholders agreed that doing the work in advance made it easier to secure guests:

> We have had greater success where we have been able to build up a relationship either with an individual family or a group and have earned some degree of trust with them and spoken to them. (*Internal*)

Some teams said they needed support doing this. One BBC journalist suggested that it would be useful to have centralised support accessing hard-to-reach participants, including migrants.

It would also be easier to secure migrant guests if journalists were more flexible about including people who may not have been involved in the *specific* story they are reporting on but have had similar experiences elsewhere. Building relationships with potential migrant contributors or people who can broker interviews with them is also likely to be easier where journalists specialise and are thus able to invest the time. If a different person covers each migration story, it will be more difficult. Section 10 (pp.63-64) discusses subject specialisation and expertise in more detail.

Migration levels and numbers

In political interviews, BBC journalists sometimes inadvertently promoted a specific political position on migration: namely, that net migration targets are the way forward.

<u>A respectable school of thought holds that politicians cannot reasonably specify what level of net migration is right for the UK</u>. This is the mainstream view among economists, in fact.

Why? Migration is made up of multiple different routes: workers, students, family members, refugees. Policymakers face different trade-offs in each route. One hundred work visa holders will have different impacts from one hundred refugees. This makes it almost impossible to specify a 'right' level of total net migration in any rational way.

Of course, some politicians *have* specified what they think is the right level of net migration. This doesn't mean that all politicians should be able to do so.

However, some interviewers argue that politicians *must* have an answer on the right level of net migration if they have thought properly about the economy. Others suggest that they do have a number in mind but are hiding it from the public. But in this case, 'I reject the premise of your question' is a perfectly reasonable response. Creating the impression that it isn't presents a risk to impartiality.

Audience research participants, quite reasonably, were unaware that deciding not to have a numerical target is a legitimate political choice. BBC coverage risked reinforcing this perspective rather than helping people understand the counter-arguments.

> The research found that across many participants, there was an underlying assumption and expectation that politicians would set levels and targets for migration to the UK. […] Participants tended to approach the relevant interviews with this belief in the first place, which could then be reinforced by this line of questioning. (*Jigsaw audience research*)

Political framing of net migration

The net migration topic suffers at the hands of political framing. A typical piece of BBC coverage tells us that high net migration figures will be a blow to the government, and that political promises have been repeatedly broken. These things may well be true. Politicians *have* repeatedly made and broken promises about migration levels. It is reasonable to hold them to account—either for why they did not fulfil the promise or for why they made it in the first place.

But these are not the only questions BBC journalists should ask about net migration. The questions about "the bloody substance", as one of our external experts put it, are squeezed out. How does high net migration affect different parts of the UK? What are the economic and social impacts? Can public services cope? How does it affect the housing market? These are among the key topics that the audience research participants wanted to know more about, and BBC coverage should address them more often.

> So that's a perfectly reasonable question to ask them. "You said numbers would come down. They haven't. What are you going to do about that?" And the possible answer is, "Nothing." So I think that would be a perfectly reasonable line of questioning because the government had an explicit stated policy to bring numbers down. But I think it's not helpful for an understanding of immigration policy to put too much emphasis on just the total number. (*External*)

Second, focusing on politics alone creates the risk that coverage of net migration—if not necessarily coverage of migration more broadly—ignores liberal views that sit outside mainstream Westminster opinion.

The government and the opposition both agree that net migration should be reduced. Coverage that seeks a narrow 'left-right balance' by interviewing Conservative and Labour guests will find broadly the same message coming from both of them, *i.e.*, that high migration is a problem that needs to be addressed.

One external stakeholder who believes rising immigration is not a problem argued:

> The BBC's framing is, "The government has failed because net migration has increased", and the opposition says, "You've failed," and the government says, "Yes, but you would fail even worse." And, obviously, my perspective is not reflected at all! (*External*)

Finally, the BBC should be careful about implying that the government can deliver precise levels of net migration if it wants to.

For example, one journalist noted that after Brexit, "immigration policy is now entirely the responsibility of government in Westminster. They can't blame anybody else". True in a narrow sense. The government can of course choose to be more or less restrictive on migration. But this framing minimises the immense difficulties the government has predicting how many people will take up their policies, how many will then emigrate and when, or how many British citizens will arrive and leave. BBC coverage could do more to convey these challenges.
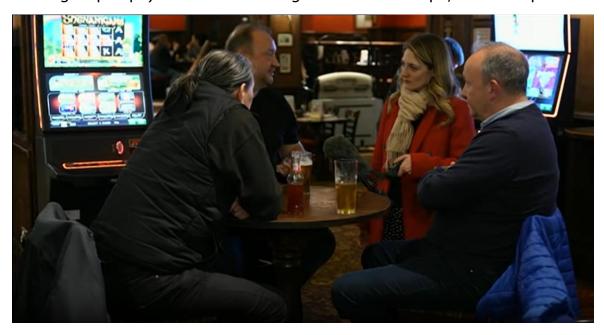
Members of the public

BBC coverage often includes vox pops (clips from members of the public). External experts and audience research participants were divided on their value. Some thought they leavened the coverage and helped understand locals' perspective. They often thought it was important in principle to include the views of different people in coverage of migration (including local people, the wider public, as well as migrants). Others, though, thought vox pops added little content and would prefer to hear more from experts.

To some extent this is a matter of taste. However, a few points on vox pops and other contributions from members of the public are worth a mention.

First, if the purpose of interviewing members of the public is to help audiences understand public attitudes, the standard 15-second clip usually can't do justice to this. Some of the content we reviewed did more

<u>to get under the skin of public attitudes by allowing slightly longer discussions</u>. Some showed interactions between different people (*i.e.*, focus group clips) or included a larger number of clips, for example.

Charlotte Wright interviews eight people in the same pub in a South East Today *package about small boat arrivals (8 March 2022)*

Second, <u>journalists should not rely on members of the public as the main or only way to represent sceptical views on migration</u>. Audiences may not respect the people included in vox pops as much as they respect expert contributors. Some stakeholders and audience research participants felt that the specific people interviewed were not good ambassadors for the sceptical viewpoint and that it was unfair to pit their perspectives against experts.

> There can be a tendency in some of our reporting on immigration to have quite a sort of solid body of opinion from one way, which is perhaps pro-immigration or recognising the benefits of immigration. And then we might get a vox pop on the street for people to say, 'Actually, I'm a bit worried in my area.' And I'm just not sure there's always parity in that. (*Internal*)

Third, vox pops in pre-recorded content should focus on opinion, not facts. When vox pops are clipped for news packages, audiences might reasonably assume that the BBC endorses the empirical statement.

Fourth, people who volunteer to participate—or whom journalists choose to broadcast—may have the strongest views. Vox pops and other contributions from the public <u>can thus create the impression that the debate is more polarised than it really is</u>. As one expert put it:

> For example, on the issue of Brexit, the majority view will be, 'We're all bored of this now.' But the people who volunteer to be on the programme are the last

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> people who aren't bored with it. […] But I think something like the BBC, whose job is to sort of animate and reflect the public conversation should, I think, maybe be at the forefront of trying to sort of get past that and find ways to sort of portray dialogue, difference, disagreement on a topic, but not just from those with the strongest views. (*External*)

Audience research participants also raised this concern. They wanted public views to be represented in a nuanced and sensitive way, and felt some examples of vox pops presented polarised views that didn't fully represent public opinion.

Beyond the Westminster bubble

For understandable reasons, BBC programmes make heavy use of the most easily accessible contributors: politicians, lobbyists, and the better-connected charities. These people are articulate and available at short notice.

Getting contributors from outside the Westminster bubble is more difficult, although some coverage has done a good job finding them.

> What do I film? So, which business wants to come on the telly and say, 'I need more migrants'? They don't. They want to hide. […] You want to record in a hospital. You can't get in. NHS England won't let us in. […] The reason we cover politics is because they're desperate to talk. It's easy. You just shove them in front of the camera. (*Internal*)

However, audience research participants often felt they learned little from politicians. As one external stakeholder (quite reasonably) argued:

> Most of those political voices and those policy voices are not saying anything particularly new or different. (*External*)

This was particularly the case for packages with short clips that don't allow politicians to explain their views fully. Panel debates tended to give more space to explore their arguments.

Some of the most effective coverage did bring in people with direct experience on the ground.[*] This includes migrants, employers, local authority staff, operational officials or public service professionals. Examples of contributors with on the ground expertise included interviews with a foster union representative talking about the impacts of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on children's services on *Politics*

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[*] Clarification: the main charities that advocate on migration issues typically do also have experience on the ground (e.g. providing support services), but they are normally used in BBC coverage for general discussions of policy.

South East (BBC One SE England), as well as individual employers who were not part of lobby groups, on Radio 5 Live.

Of course, the BBC should not *ignore* politicians. Coverage needs to help voters understand what political parties are doing. But <u>there is a good case for shifting the balance in many programmes further towards people with more direct experience</u>.

> Labour versus Tories does not equal balance. […] The two sides of this issue are being very, very narrowly defined, whereas there's actually a much broader spectrum of opinion and also possible political action. (*External*)

Academics

Some BBC journalists said they found it difficult to get what they needed from academics. They worried (quite reasonably) that academics would be brought in as impartial experts but end up advocating for one political perspective. Academics are often not up to date with the policy debate and sometimes communicate poorly with non-expert audiences.

Nonetheless, some questions require academic or similar technical expertise to answer. This is because they may require statistics or a 'zoomed out' lens to answer properly. As one stakeholder put it:

> There is a presumption that all stories can be told through the vehicle of the individual: what people call human interest. That's true about some things, but it's not true about most things. A story which is about an individual or about ten individuals, doesn't necessarily add up to the experience or the meaning of that group of ten individuals. […] Nobody would be able to understand what causes a traffic jam by telling the story of each individual driver. (*External*)

Examples include the impacts of immigration on housing, the labour market, or (to some extent) public services. These are also, incidentally, subjects the BBC does not cover much, despite demand from audiences.

7. LANGUAGE AND DEFINITIONS

Impartiality requires clear and accurate language that enables audiences to understand the story properly. When BBC journalists decide what language to use, they should consider both what is legally accurate and what audiences will understand.

Audience research participants had a basic understanding of different terms, such as migrant, asylum seeker, refugee, or illegal migration, but not the technical distinctions between them. These distinctions can be important. Participants were near unanimous that BBC coverage should explain the words it uses more clearly.

This section suggests ways BBC journalists could be clearer and more precise when using migration terms. A warning: it provides some guidance but no simple, catch-all solution. Journalists will still have to make judgments case-by-case.

Asylum seekers or migrants?

BBC coverage uses the terms 'migrants' and 'asylum seekers' interchangeably. They do not mean the same thing. If a story is specifically about asylum, only using the term 'migrants' can be misleading.

'Migrant' is a general term with no legal definition, describing people who have moved from one country to another. 'Asylum seeker' is a specific legal category: people who have applied for refugee status but have not yet received a decision. The asylum process decides whether or not a person is a refugee with a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin.

Many experts see refugees as a subset of migrants. Others reject this and argue that the term 'migrant' should not include refugees or asylum seekers. Neither of these positions is objectively more sensible.

In the audience research, however, people were closer to the second camp. They often saw 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' as rough synonyms, but saw 'migrants' as people who move by choice or specifically to work. Audience research participants often found the interchangeable use of 'migrants' and 'asylum seekers' confusing. Using these terms more precisely and explaining them each time would thus reduce confusion and enable more impartial coverage.

If journalists talk about 'migrants' and 'migration' when they are talking specifically about asylum seekers, it creates the impression that the policies are aimed at all migrants (when they are not), or that most migration comes via the Channel.

For example, BBC coverage we reviewed used phrases like "the government's plan to tackle migration" when the story was exclusively about asylum or small boats. The plan in question was not a plan to 'tackle' the vast majority of migration to the UK, which comes through managed visa routes.

Similarly, BBC coverage sometimes refers to 'migrant hotels'. The vast majority of migrants are not eligible to stay in one because they are not asylum seekers.

How to resolve this problem? First, it would be sensible simply to use the term 'asylum seekers' rather than 'migrants' for groups of people that *only* include asylum seekers. Second, audiences would appreciate a short definition in every piece that uses the term 'asylum seekers', such as "people who have applied for refugee status and are waiting for a decision". This would also help clarify a point that was not always clear to audience research participants, namely that 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' do not mean exactly the same thing.

Finally, people crossing the Channel in small boats are primarily but not exclusively asylum seekers: an estimated 90% of people crossing in the year ending June 2023 claimed asylum. Some will be refused asylum and others may never receive a decision, because of the Illegal Migration Act.[*] As a result, it is perhaps clearest to talk about "migrants and refugees crossing the Channel in small boats".

Who is a refugee?

It's useful for audiences to know when the definition of a refugee being used in the coverage is *not* the legal definition.

Legally, a refugee is a person who cannot return to their country of origin because they have a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. As of early 2024, most people receiving asylum decisions in the UK were recognised as refugees.[†]

In popular usage, the term 'refugee' is sometimes used more loosely. Some people expand it to include people fleeing violence or natural disasters who would probably not qualify for refugee status if they applied for asylum. Others argue that even if someone qualifies for asylum, they

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[*] When the Illegal Migration Act comes fully into force, people will still be able to claim asylum but will not be able to receive a decision on their claim if they arrived without authorisation.
[†] That won't necessarily be true forever: the share could go down in future. And if/when the Illegal Migration Act comes fully into force, most asylum seekers will no longer receive decisions on their asylum claims at all.

aren't a refugee in the popular sense of the word if they passed through safe countries on the way—they were no longer fleeing for their lives by the time they made the final part of their journey to the UK. Some then argue that, as a result, they are economic migrants.

The legal definition matters because governments have legal obligations towards refugees that they do not have towards other migrants. BBC coverage should make it clear when contributors are not using the legal definition.

Contributors may also present the refugee-economic migrant dichotomy as black and white. It is not. A person may be a refugee who has fled from persecution and also prefer one destination over another for economic reasons (or for non-economic ones, such as family ties).

> The truth is there's no sort of black and white definition where you say this person's an asylum seeker and legitimate and this person's some kind of economic migrant trying to get something a bit better. Lots of people who actually will be accepted as successful asylum seekers clearly are choosing Britain as opposed to other countries that they might have claimed asylum in. (*External*)

Preferring one destination over another does not disqualify a person from refugee status, even if it is legitimate to ask why people who have already reached countries with a well-functioning asylum system prefer to travel on to the UK. BBC coverage could do more to explain these contested points.

Is 'illegal immigration' accurate?

The use of the term 'illegal migration' to describe people arriving without authorisation to claim asylum was one of the most contested points stakeholders raised during this Review.

It is now an offence in UK law to arrive in the UK without permission, for example in a small boat or hidden in a lorry. Indeed, criminalising unlawful entry has been a key feature of recent legislation. Some people are in fact prosecuted for it. After people claim asylum, they receive some temporary legal protections (*e.g.*, from being removed from the UK) and the right to financial support and accommodation if they need it.

The Refugee Convention states that asylum seekers should not be penalised for their 'illegal entry or presence' but it nonetheless uses the term 'illegal' and recognises that refugees will often be required to enter without authorisation.

> We would argue that this is illegal migration. It is important to reflect that because that's what the law says. (*External*)

In other words, <u>the term 'illegal migration' is legally accurate even when discussing the arrival of asylum seekers. Using it without any further explanation may mislead the audience, however</u>.

Asylum seekers' status gives them specific legal protections and access to support. This distinguishes them from most people living in the UK without permission.

Audiences need to understand the distinction between asylum seekers and other unauthorised residents. When a radio cue referred to "the first flight taking migrants who arrived illegally to Rwanda", will listeners have known that the piece was about people who had applied for refugee status? They may not, especially in coverage that provides no further information about the people involved (and this is often the case).

The audience research found that there was "some awareness that 'migrants' may be sent [to Rwanda], but many were unclear as to their precise status".

> I do think that we need to be quite specific if we're talking about illegal migration, because what tends to happen is a blurring of the lines between someone who is seeking asylum, someone who is in the UK illegally, and the two may not be the same at all. […] I don't think the term 'illegal migration' does anything to help educate people around the broad range of migration routes. (*External*)

Many of the external experts we spoke to felt that routinely using the term 'illegal' demonised asylum seekers and played into an anti-asylum policy agenda. We tested how people responded to different migration terms in the audience research. While some were comfortable with the term 'illegal migration' and used it themselves, others considered it to be a moral judgment about whether people deserved to be in the UK, or associated it with criminal activity other than the offence of illegal entry. Knowledge of the (limited) legal routes available to refugees is low.

<u>When BBC journalists or contributors use the term 'illegal immigration' to discuss the arrival of asylum seekers, it must be clear that the discussion is about people who have applied for refugee status</u>.

<u>It will often also be necessary to explain what the term 'illegal' does and doesn't mean</u>. For example, journalists might explain that under UK law it is now an offence to arrive without permission, and that international law says refugees should not be penalised for illegal entry. In some settings it will be useful to explain that legal routes exist for some humanitarian migrants (*e.g.*, Ukrainians, Hongkongers, and very small numbers of Afghans) but that refugees often use unauthorised routes because most do not have a legal route they can apply for. <u>Participants welcomed such</u>

clarifications in the audience research, which should be routinely included in BBC coverage.

Other terms such as 'unauthorised', 'unlawful', or 'without permission' are also accurate. 'Irregular migration' is the standard term among academics, but audience research participants often found it confusing or unclear.

'Preferred' refugees

Some refugees are more politically popular than others. For example, politicians and the public often prefer refugee women and children over men. People fleeing well-understood or nearby conflicts (such as Ukraine) get more sympathy than those fleeing more distant persecution.

People who don't fall into the favoured categories can still be refugees. For example, in the year ending September 2023, adult men and women had very similar recognition rates as refugees in the UK asylum system (73% and 74%, respectively).

Similarly, how much money someone has is irrelevant to whether they qualify for refugee status.

Arguments that people are not refugees because they are men or have money often go unchallenged. It is perfectly understandable for politicians or the public to *prefer* the idea of offering protection to women or the poor. But the question who is a refugee is not the same as the question which refugees the UK can or should prioritise. This should be clear in the coverage.

> I think there's a simplified understanding of refugees which is that, if you are leaving a place where there's a shooting war, then you are a refugee and otherwise you are an 'economic migrant'. [...] Under the legal UN Convention definition of a refugee, it's not that at all. (*External)*

BBC journalists should also be aware that the choice of words is not neutral. The term 'refugee' elicited more sympathy among audience research participants than other terms used to describe people on the move. Contributors are more likely to call people refugees if they approve of them, and migrants if they do not.

For example, it is striking that the BBC almost never uses the term 'Ukrainian migrants'. Ukrainians are described as refugees, even though they have not been assessed for refugee status. Indeed, our audience research participants sometimes noticed that BBC coverage *in general* was more sympathetic to Ukrainians than other migrant groups. It was also more likely to explore individual stories and to include their voices.

On the other hand, BBC coverage often describes asylum seekers who could be sent to Rwanda simply as 'migrants', even though many are believed to be refugees. Given they have not received an asylum decision, it would be clearer to describe them either as 'asylum seekers' or as 'refugees and migrants'.

> One of the headlines on [BBC regional news programme] was 'inspirational Ukrainian teenager'. And this plays into the 'good refugee, bad asylum seeker' thing that we see all the time. (*External*)
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> ***
>
> [T]here's a massive disparity between the coverage of the war in Ukraine and the war in Sudan. […] [W]hen I've spoken up about this I've been told, well, you know, there's more affinity to Ukrainian people… But, we have a quite significant, well-established Sudanese-British diaspora community in the UK and generally wider East African community… very significant, actually, in numbers. (*External*)

There may be no single, perfectly impartial wording that will fit all circumstances. BBC journalists should be mindful of the risk that words they choose can reinforce political judgments about who is deserving and who is not, by calling some people who will have valid claims to asylum 'migrants', and others 'refugees'. Again, a good way to reduce these risks is to choose terms precisely and explain what they mean.

If in doubt, say 'people'

Some external stakeholders found the use of generic terms such as 'migrants' dehumanising. For example, they argued that phrases such as "migrant deaths" or "a migrant has died" in coverage of casualties in the Channel or Mediterranean were insensitive.

> There should be care taken to ensure that people losing their lives when crossing the Channel are not dehumanised for the sake of a pithy headline. (*External*)

In the audience research, some people also felt that the term 'migrants' could reduce empathy in some contexts. It is not always necessary to use the term 'migrants' at all. BBC journalists sometimes just talk about 'people': for example, 'people crossing the Channel in small boats' or 'people working in the UK illegally' without any loss of understanding. This is a good solution to terminology doubts in many circumstances.

Guidance on terminology

The BBC could consider having a home for slightly more detailed guidance for journalists on migration terminology. Advisory notes have occasionally been circulated in response to specific developments, for those who were

paying attention at the time. The online style guide also provides limited information and feels a bit out of date.

Guidance should not be too prescriptive. After all, accepted terms change over time and depend on the context.

Quoting emotive language

BBC journalists often quote emotive language used by politicians or advocacy groups. When correspondents quote others on air, it is not always clear whether the language is theirs or someone else's.

For example, when a correspondent on air referenced criticism that volunteers or Border Force officials in the Channel were providing a "taxi service for migrants", it may have felt obvious to the speaker that this was quoted language, but not necessarily to the listener. Audiences, quite reasonably, are not always listening as attentively as editors and producers. In the audience research, some people thought that quotes from politicians were the words of BBC presenters, even though the words were attributed.

Particularly in broadcast, journalists should quote with care and consider whether emotive language that would breach impartiality rules if they used it themselves is really adding to the content.

'Crises'

The thematic review of UK public finances pointed out that the word 'crisis' is not just a tempting headline, but also a political judgment. The same applies to migration. For example, it seems unnecessary for Online stories to be routinely tagged with the label "Calais migrant crisis" or "Europe migrant crisis" (see below). The word 'crisis' suggests a new and sudden emergency. Most of the stories describe problems that have rumbled on for years.

How many people cross the Channel in small boats and how many claim asylum in the UK?

🕓 3 days ago

◁ **Calais migrant crisis**

GETTY IMAGES

Tone

Few stakeholders raised tone as a problem in BBC coverage, nor did participants in the audience research. Different presenters and programmes quite rightly have different styles and personalities.

One minor point is that BBC correspondents sometimes pronounce numbers with a tone of shock and surprise, as if to emphasize how big or bad they are. This included cases where the numbers were not particularly big (for example, 200 people crossing the Channel in small boats on a single day). Even with much larger numbers, whether a figure is big (and certainly whether it is bad) is a matter of opinion.

8. IMAGES

Images frame the story for audiences in subtle ways in TV, Online coverage and social media. They can aid understanding: audience research participants often said they found TV coverage easier to digest. But there are often many ways of looking at the same phenomenon. By choosing them selectively, images might inadvertently nudge audiences towards particular viewpoints.

Several stakeholders worried that the images the BBC and other media outlets use to illustrate migration stories are dehumanising or threatening. Examples included zoomed-out photos of people on small boats or waiting in Dover without their faces visible.

A commonly used image in online coverage shows people wearing orange ponchos waiting to board a coach to a processing facility at Dungeness, for example:

This image was frequently used to illustrate online stories on asylum

It is visually interesting, which is presumably why it was chosen. But to many people in the audience research it looked as if asylum seekers were in prison. For some, the orange clothing also created associations with Guantánamo Bay and terrorism. The audience research indicated that it was harder for people to empathise with people in images when their faces were hidden or when they appeared in groups.

By contrast, audiences thought an image of a person's face presented a more human picture of international migrants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, stories about Ukrainian refugees appeared to be more likely to use images of 'ordinary' people.

This image was used to illustrate an Online story about asylum seekers struggling to access education

Of course, it will often not be possible or ethical to show the faces of real people involved in the stories. There are many other options, though. In other coverage involving potentially vulnerable people, images sometimes anonymise subjects by using real or stock images showing their hands. Depending on the precise topic, other options include stock images of ordinary people, relevant government buildings, border and customs areas, or detention facilities.

> You very, very rarely get to see images of people who are just living normal lives, which is the majority of people waiting for asylum. (*External*)

Representativeness and relevance

Images invite us to make assumptions about what is normal or representative. As a result, images that don't represent the 'normal' experience can be misleading if they are used repeatedly.

For example, stories about the asylum system are often illustrated with pictures of people arriving in small boats. Most people coming by small boat do claim asylum. But most *asylum seekers* currently do not arrive by small boat. If asylum stories are almost always illustrated with small boat images, it could fuel a misperception about the statistical reality.

Similarly, by late 2023, relatively few small boats were arriving on beaches. Most were taken to processing facilities at Western Jet Foil in Dover. One stakeholder pointed out that beach landings appeared to be more common in BBC stock images than in reality, arguably creating a misleading impression of what 'normally' happens on arrival.

The BBC often uses images of RNLI boats and volunteer crew to illustrate stories about asylum policy and politics. However, most small boats are

picked up by Border Force, not RNLI. Routinely using RNLI images about the politics of asylum risks creating a misleading impression that they are a political organisation, when they are not. It is also not appropriate to show their volunteer crew members' faces without their consent.

Some types of migration are much harder to capture in images at all. For example, it is easier to photograph men arriving in small boats than women joining them on family unification visas a couple of years later.

No rigid rule says one image is sufficiently representative and another is not. Representativeness is a more meaningful goal when considering the cumulative effect of images over time.

BBC journalists should ask themselves *why* they are using a particular image, and how representative it is. They should be mindful of the risks that repeatedly using some images may create misleading impressions of what is normal, or lose sight of the human lives behind the stories.

9. SOCIAL MEDIA

Our review of social media output focused primarily on X (formerly Twitter) with a more limited review of Facebook and Instagram posts. We did not examine social media posts from freelancers (*e.g.*, Gary Lineker), which have been reviewed separately.

BBC programmes' accounts were mainly used to promote online articles or broadcast clips. The post's main text was typically the headline of the story or a quote from a broadcast contributor. Individual journalists posting from their own accounts were more likely to provide or repost information other than links to BBC content, such as breaking news, updates from inside courtrooms or statistics.

Social media posts usually followed published social media guidelines. A small share perhaps didn't. For example, some accounts reposted content by people with an advocacy agenda (on either side of the debate), or that included unattributed data.

Some broader impartiality issues were not clearly covered in the social media guidelines.

First, there appeared to be inconsistent editorial overview of social media posts. Posts often seemed to be produced *ad hoc*, without considering impartiality on a particular topic over a period of time. For example, programme or individual accounts sometimes made several posts on a similar story. Especially where audiences follow more than one account (*e.g.*, a regional platform and a local radio one), the cumulative effect may be to put undue emphasis on one story or viewpoint.

Second, social media posts face the same challenge that headlines do more broadly: it is very difficult to provide any nuance or context. It is also difficult to offer more than one perspective. Some X posts thus gave a government line with no alternative perspective, while others highlighted criticism of the government with no government response. These perspectives and the broader context may, of course, be included in the stories that social media posts link to, but journalists should not assume audiences will click on them.

Third, it is worth asking whether it is right that the threshold for newsworthiness in social media posts and ordinary BBC content should be different. For example, by 2023, whether 100 people arrived yesterday by small boat was not really news. Posting daily boat arrival numbers without context would not meet the same standards as other BBC content. (See the section 'Is that a big number?' above, pp.16-18.)

One BBC journalist suggested that *all* social media posts from correspondents should meet the same editorial standards as other BBC content.

> I think that we shouldn't discriminate between our Twitter output and our News output that's been through proper editorial controls. And I think everything that we broadcast—whether it's on Twitter or any other platform—should go through proper editorial controls. (*Internal*)

The BBC should consider whether a more consistent approach to social media engagement is needed. This would require more active oversight by editors and others to reduce the risks to impartiality.

10. BBC STRUCTURES AND RESOURCES

Experts and BBC journalists raised various questions about how BBC resources are prioritised and how its outputs are organised. Many were general questions that go well beyond migration and the scope of this review. This section discusses three that were particularly relevant to this review.

Journalists' expertise

Many of the problems identified in this review result from a lack of specialist expertise on migration, more than deliberate choices. Providing context, properly interrogating claims, and moving beyond political framing are all much easier for people who know a fair amount about migration. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this point.

A handful of specialists in the BBC understand migration very well and can produce excellent content at short notice. Some generalists have the freedom and resources to spend the time to get it right, and they do.

However, many migration stories are covered by the Online or Political teams who are thinly spread across all topic areas and may not have the time to understand the issues fully themselves.

First, is the balance of investment between generalist and specialist reporting appropriate? Specialists are stretched and may not be available when their expertise is needed. Some generalists emphasised how important specialist reporters were as a resource to all BBC journalists.

> Because the Millbank machine is like a huge part of the BBC with masses of resources, its tanks just start rolling in the morning. And [some of us] are sitting there thinking, "Are we sure we're on the right story?" But by that point it's too late. (*Internal*)

One suggestion was to encourage political reporters to get some specialist knowledge too. If different political reporters developed a sub-specialism in different areas, it might help increase the amount of specialist expertise within the Millbank operation. Several of the journalists we spoke to supported this idea.

> Structurally, I feel that there could be benefit in trying to reassign coverage [on the same topics] to people so that it's not someone jumping in and out of a policy issue. (*Internal*)

Second, is the BBC investing enough in the expertise behind day-to-day online stories? Senior specialists get pulled into online stories when they are among the top stories of the day, but other stories will often be

written by generalists who cannot be expected to know the ins and outs of migration policy.

The difference shows. For example, a relatively common but usually low-profile story is the periodically updated Shortage Occupation List (SOL), now known as the Immigration Salary List (ISL). For people not very familiar with the immigration rules, the list sounds more important than it is. Many workers can still come to the UK even if their job is not on the list. The BBC's specialist reporters know this.

But a surprisingly high share of all stories mentioning the shortage list over the past few years define it incorrectly. The most common mistake was to imply that *only* jobs on the list were eligible for visas. Accurate and meaningful descriptions of what the list does were rare (in 2023, it allowed workers to come to the UK on a lower salary). This is just one relatively niche example, but it illustrates the difficulties that arise if you expect non-specialists to churn out stories about complex policy topics quickly.

Finally, <u>should the BBC have better mechanisms for passing knowledge between experts and generalists</u>? Some BBC journalists certainly thought so.

> I can think of examples where *More or Less*, which I think is a very, very interesting listen, have reported something really important on this topic […] and that nugget which they've got or their insight into it just gets lost. And the BBC doesn't even pick up on its own reporting. And so I think we're quite poor at this. I think there are solutions to it. I think the solutions can be found by looking at how other organisations do like internal learning, how we learn from each other. (*Internal*)

Another wanted more systematic ways of sharing guidance and advising colleagues on how to deal with misleading statements:

> So let's imagine there was a big statement on immigration policy and we had a team who produced a quick guide and said, 'If you are a reporter, wherever you are in the BBC working on this, when the minister responsible says this, in fact that's not true because of this. When the opposition says the process works like this. This is a phrase you can use to say, actually, that's not accurate and the phrase is...' If we could share that work so that people who don't have the resources […] within the BBC can still be robust in handling the detail of the story. That feels to me like that would be a useful service to do. (*Internal*)

Accessing external training resources could also be an option. For example, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) has a free professional development module on migration. (*Disclosure: my organisation, the Migration Observatory, produced it in collaboration with NCTJ.*)

Recruitment

BBC journalists and senior management told us that staff come disproportionately from groups that are more relaxed about migration. Several pointed out that it would be <u>easier for the BBC to represent different views convincingly if staff had a wider range of backgrounds and political opinions</u>. They might also feel more confident exploring all relevant views without worrying that they are stereotyping or patronising them.

> It would be useful, in a perfect world, if [members of the BBC team] had a bigger variety of views and if we challenged ourselves in those meetings and you heard dissenting voices. I think however hard you try and however hard you're professionally trained to suppress your personal opinions and ensure balance on screen, it's good to be challenged and it's hard to avoid groupthink when people are drawn from the same sort of pool. So recruitment is a real big challenge for us to kind of recruit from a more diverse sort of pool. And I think equally, on the other side of the argument, if we had more migrants or children of migrants in the team, that also helps because obviously that's an important perspective. (*Internal*)

Formats

Realistically, <u>some topics are complex enough that they require more than the standard slot lengths of 2½ to 5 minutes</u>. BBC journalists often raised the question how the BBC could enable slightly longer formats within news (*e.g.*, closer to 5-10 minutes).

> The BBC's context for a great deal of its journalism—too much of its journalism—is the TV bulletin. But the TV bulletin is a format which, while remaining important to a section of the population, is not at all relevant to huge numbers of other people. The TV bulletin, to state the obvious, has constraints. (*Internal*)

Suggestions included:

- Covering fewer stories or making bulletins more flexible to cover some stories much more briefly and make space for longer packages on others.

- Thinking about alternative digital homes for explanatory or investigative output to give broadcast content a longer life. This might also reduce reliance on the front page of the website—a relatively small space—as the main way to get exposure for high-quality content.

- Reusing material more across multiple outlets to get better value from the work BBC journalists have done—and thus saving

resources that could be dedicated to commissioning engaging, in-depth content.

11. CONCLUSION

Just as news tends to focus on problems, reviews like this one naturally focus on the negatives. <u>It's worth emphasising that the quality of BBC coverage on migration has generally been high</u>.

The BBC journalists we interviewed were candid and thoughtful about the challenges covering a complex and contested topic like migration. Several said that it was one of the most difficult topics to cover, especially for non-specialists.

Can the BBC increase trust across all its audiences?

The BBC's audience includes people with widely varying views on migration. It also includes migrants themselves. BBC coverage needs to gain the trust of all of these audiences.

<u>If we look closely at the critiques of BBC coverage, they are not zero sum</u>. Different audience groups in our research prioritised different things and those things were not mutually exclusive.

Some audience research participants wanted concerns about migration and arguments in favour of restrictive policies to be unpacked more fully and wanted more coverage on the impacts of migration on housing or public services. Nobody argued that these voices or topics should be *excluded*. All sides were happy to hear from people they disagreed with as long as everyone was treated respectfully.

Other audience members—often but not always those with more liberal views—wanted more humanising language and depictions of people on the move. Few people objected to this idea, even if they didn't prioritise it as highly. Indeed, many people with more sceptical views on migration were keen to hear migrants' voices and perspectives more, as long as they felt this perspective was not being privileged over others.

The result is that <u>it should be possible to improve the trust of all audience groups in BBC coverage</u>. For example, the BBC could work harder to reflect arguments about the challenges migration brings while also being more sensitive to the human lives behind the statistics. Many audience groups would welcome a move to commission migration coverage on a more varied and imaginative range of topics, and to provide more explanation and context.

In the audience research, several pieces of content we tested appealed to audiences irrespective of their views on migration. They included content that went beyond political soundbites to discuss the evidence and justification for different arguments, or that provided new and surprising

information. When the BBC moved beyond political framing to cover the substance, audiences responded well.

What next?

This report has aimed to provide practical guidance for BBC journalists in their daily work. Some of the suggestions are more relevant to the BBC's senior management, however. Among them, the three most important are:

- To protect and further develop specialist expertise, which is essential to producing impartial coverage;
- To liberate much more short-form and Online coverage from political framing, which appears to be quite deeply embedded in BBC practice; and
- To commission more imaginative content that goes beyond the daily news cycle.

It is for the BBC to determine the best way to implement these findings. An overarching recommendation is that it should be clear who is responsible for making it happen. This should include someone at the senior leader level (*i.e.*, a named director). BBC journalists already know about most of the problems this report discusses: the criticisms often come directly from them. It's not that nobody has thought of these things before. If the Board agrees with the analysis in this report, the challenge is to find a way to make something happen—and to make it last.

APPENDIX

Methods

We used four main sources of information to conduct the review.

We spoke to 101 people, including BBC journalists, executives, and external experts. The external interviewees included people from think tanks, charities, other media organisations, local and national government, the Westminster Parliament, academia, and other organisations interested in migration. Nearly all were interviewed but two submitted written comments instead.

Second, we reviewed samples of BBC coverage (see below for a list of programmes covered). With the assistance of the BBC team supporting the review, we reviewed over 1,500 pieces of content that used the migration keywords such as 'migrants', 'refugees', or 'visas'. Most of the coverage was from the main review period of March to November 2022, but we also included more recent periods for discussions of net migration and labour shortages.

In addition to this broad review, the team conducted more detailed reviews of four case studies: the launch of the Rwanda deal in April 2022; net migration numbers; labour shortages; and portrayals of 'young men' claiming asylum in the UK. These topics were chosen to enable us to explore a range of coverage types and examine specific areas of concern identified in the stakeholder interviews or in the initial, broad review.

We also reviewed social media posts by BBC programme and relevant individual accounts.

The content review was necessarily a subjective process. We decided not to attempt any statistical content analysis, as we were not convinced that the results would be robust.

Third, we commissioned the market research company, Jigsaw Research, to conduct focus groups with audience members. The research included 17 online focus groups with a total of 93 participants. Of these, 3 groups were with migrants (12 participants) and 14 were with British audience

members (81 participants). The charity, IMIX, facilitated recruitment for the migrant focus groups, which were conducted by Jigsaw.

The focus groups included people with a range of demographic characteristics from across the UK, and with different views (positive, neutral, negative) towards the impacts of migration in the UK. The Jigsaw report, which is also being published with this review, contains a more detailed description of participants' characteristics. The analysis in this report drew both on the Jigsaw report and a review of the focus group sessions themselves.

Fourth, we reviewed complaints related to migration coverage during the review period, although almost all of the issues they raised were also raised in the stakeholder interviews.

Limitations

It's not possible to determine whether BBC coverage 'overall' is more biased in one direction or another. The criticisms that come from different perspectives can't be added up. Does the limited depth to some sceptical arguments about migration somehow 'cancel out' the lack of migrant voices? Clearly not.

We struggled to identify any objective measures of what is 'enough' representation of one viewpoint or topic. Some experts suggested that opinion polling could guide BBC coverage. For example, if a substantial share of people support a policy, the arguments for that policy should get a good airing. This may be true to an extent. It is useful to understand public opinion to make sure that mainstream views are not being side-lined. But a mechanical approach to reflecting views based on polling seems unwise. Polling results are sensitive to question wording and results can be inconsistent.

The judgments in this report are thus subjective. None of the criticisms apply to *all* BBC content: there are plenty of counter-examples.

When this report says that a certain problem 'sometimes' crops up in BBC coverage, it means that it happened often enough in the sample of coverage we reviewed to be worth mentioning.

Drama and comedy

One stakeholder argued that drama and other non-factual output will crucially shape perceptions of impartiality:

> The BBC's journalism doesn't exist in abstract from the rest of its output. […] [It] in a way starts from a place where it is hard, I think, for it to be impartial in the widest sense. […] In this particular area, the tilt of most entertainment output—and very strongly the BBC—is a narrative about immigration which is very heavily pro-certain kinds of migration. (*External*)

We did review the limited drama and comedy output during the review period that mentioned migration explicitly. This limited sample of content did appear to portray migration in largely positive ways.

On the other hand, it may be that the characters in drama do not represent the diversity of UK society. The methods used for this review were not up to the task of assessing this.

If the BBC wants to explore impartiality as it relates to drama and comedy, it would require a separate review with people who understand the specific issues they raise.

Content reviewed

The BBC's archive search transcript tool was used to identify a range of Television programmes relevant to migration by searching for keywords we selected. A selection of Radio programmes went through speech-to-text transfer and then the same transcript search criteria were applied. Finally, the keywords search was also used for identifying relevant content for Online material and for programme and relevant personal social media accounts. Programmes in the sample included:

NEWS & CURRENT AFFAIRS

Television

BBC ONE:
BBC Breakfast
BBC News at One
BBC News at Six
BBC News at Ten
BBC Weekend News: Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Newscast
Panorama
Question Time
Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg
The One Show

BBC TWO:
BBC News at 9

Newsnight
Newsnight Specials
Newsnight YouTube
Politics Live
Politics UK

BBC THREE:
The Catch Up

BBC News Channel:
BBC News Channel sequences (0900 – 2400)

CBBC:
Newsround

NATIONS & REGIONS

BBC Northern Ireland:
BBC Newsline: Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Sunday Politics
The View

BBC ONE Scotland & BBC Scotland:
Debate Night
Politics Scotland
Reporting Scotland Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Seven Days
The Nine
The Seven

BBC Wales:
BBC Wales Today: Lunchtime & Evening News
Politics Wales

BBC ONE English Regions:
BBC London: Lunchtime & Evening News
Channel Island News: Evening news
East Midlands Today: Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Look East (incl. Look East West to Nov 2022): Evening News
Look East: Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Look North: (East Yorks & Lincs): Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Look North: (Yorks) Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
Look North: (North East & Cumbria) Lunchtime, Evening & Late News

Midlands Today: Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
North West Tonight: Evening & Late News
Points West: Evening & Late News
Politics East
Politics East Midlands
Politics London
Politics Midlands
Politics North (North East & Cumbria)
Politics North (East Yorks & Lincs)
Politics North West
Politics South
Politics South East
Politics South West
Politics West
South East Today: Early, Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
South Today: Oxford – Evening News
South Today: Lunchtime, Evening & Late News
South West: Spotlight – Lunchtime, Evening & Late News

RADIO

BBC Radio 1:
Newsbeat

BBC Radio 2:
Jeremy Vine

BBC Radio 4:
A Point of View
AntiSocial
Any Answers?
Any Questions?
Broadcasting House
Farming Today
Feedback
File on 4
From Our Own Correspondent
Letter from Ukraine
PM
Political Thinking with Nick Robinson
Six o'Clock News
Sunday
The Briefing Room
The Week in Westminster

The Westminster Hour
The World at One
The World This Weekend
The World Tonight
Today
Woman's Hour
You and Yours

BBC Radio 5 Live:
5Live Breakfast
5Live Drive
Colin Murray
Colin Murray with Nick Bright
Dotun Adebayo
Naga Munchetty
Newscast
Nicky Campbell
Nicky Campbell with Colin Murray
Nihal Arthanayake
Nihal Arthanayake with Krishnan Guru-Murthy
Stephen Nolan
Stephen Nolan with Connor Phillips
Wake Up to Money

BBC Local Radio

BBC Essex, BBC Radio Kent, BBC Radio Lincolnshire, BBC Radio London, BBC Radio York
News Bulletins
Breakfast Show
Morning Show
Afternoon Show
Saturday Breakfast
Sunday Breakfast

NATIONS

BBC Radio Scotland
Drivetime
Drivetime with John Beattie
Good Morning Scotland
Lunchtime Live
Mornings
Mornings with Stephen Jardine
Shereen

The Sunday Show

BBC Radio Ulster
Good Morning Ulster
The Nolan Show
Talkback
Evening Extra

BBC Radio Wales
All Things Considered
Carol Vorderman
Dot Davies
Jason Mohammad
Radio Wales Breakfast
Radio Wales Breakfast with Claire Summers
Radio Wales Breakfast with Oliver Hides
Radio Wales Drive
Radio Wales Drive with Gareth Lewis
Radio Wales Drive with Wyre Davies
Sunday Supplement

In addition, a significant range of documentaries and other content (single programmes & series (including podcasts)) on migration topics relevant to the review's work were identified across platforms using the search terms.

BBC News Online
Articles from the following subject areas:
Business
Culture
England
News
News Extra
Newsbeat
Newsround
Northern Ireland
Politics (incl. Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales)
Scotland
Stories
Technology
The Papers
Topics
UK
Wales