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Review of BBC's guidance on individual use of personal social media for those working in the on-air freelance community, outside News, Current Affairs and Factual Journalism

Audience Research

2023



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1. Executive summary

Background to the audience research



Review of BBC's social media guidance for on-air freelancers outside News

In March 2023, the BBC engaged John Hardie as an external, independent reviewer to review how its social media guidance applies to on-air freelancers.

The review had the following terms of reference.

To review the BBC's guidance on 'individual use of social media' in relation to the personal social media use of those working in the on-air freelance community outside News, Current Affairs and Factual journalism. To consider options as to how it should be formulated.

To provide recommendations to the BBC as to how it could apply that guidance, considering the BBC's Charter commitments to both impartiality and freedom of expression. Future guidance must be easy to understand, practical and deliverable.

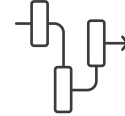
Audience research was commissioned as part of the review. This research was undertaken by Jigsaw Research.



Overall objectives of the audience research

Jigsaw Research undertook audience research in order to explore whether the public feels BBC presenters working outside News, Current Affairs and Factual journalism (non-news presenters) should be able to express their views freely about political/social issues on their personal social media accounts.

A qualitative and quantitative approach was commissioned to deliver the research objectives.



Overall approach to the research

The qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in May 2023.

In terms of the qualitative research, Jigsaw Research conducted eight online focus groups, convening a total of 48 people from eight locations across the UK. The research included exploring audience perceptions of real social media posts from a range of freelance BBC non-news presenters on their personal social media accounts.

Qualitative participants were recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population. The sample included a spread of ages, gender, socio-economic groups, ethnicity, sexual orientation and political leanings.

In terms of the quantitative research, this entailed an online survey of 3,198 UK adults. The quantitative sample was weighted to be nationally representative of the UK on nation and region, age, gender, working status, social grade, education and ethnicity.

When participants reflected on BBC non-news presenters' activity on their personal social media accounts, there was support in principle for freedom of expression

Spontaneous reactions to posts often focused first on the views being expressed

In the research, participant reactions to social media posts often first and foremost focused on the views being expressed, how they felt about the view and whether they agreed or disagreed with what was being said. Beyond reacting to the view expressed, there were a number of other factors shaping initial reactions: the relative sensitivity of the topic (posts perceived to be political and some social issues could activate participant sensitivities), how the audience felt about the individual posting on social media, and the way the view was expressed (for instance, using emotive language or a strong emotional tone).

Participants typically read social media posts as the personal views of high-profile figures, and did not tend to associate posts directly with any organisations

The research indicated that when audience members see posts from the personal social media accounts of BBC non-news presenters, they largely see them in the context of high-profile individuals expressing their own opinions on their own social media accounts. When looking at such posts, participants rarely referenced the BBC spontaneously, and did not typically link posts to the BBC (unless recalling recent media coverage) or raise questions about its impartiality.

There was support in principle for freedom of expression for BBC non-news presenters on their own personal social media accounts

When participants reflected on the issue, freedom of expression appeared to be the priority principle in the context of personal social media. Being opinionated on social media was generally an expected and accepted norm, and one of the core roles that social media was seen as playing in people's lives and wider society. There was therefore a general expectation that people would freely express their views and opinions in this context and that this space for opinion would be relatively unconstrained compared with other media contexts such as on-air broadcast output.

It was also considered a matter of personal choice whether a user engaged with a particular 'author' (individual posting on social media) and their views, which served to create further permission for freedom of expression in this context.

On reflection, participants generally did not expect BBC non-news presenters to adhere to the same standards of off-air impartiality as BBC News presenters

Participants felt it was important that BBC News journalists did not express personal opinions in general and particularly about political and social issues in any media context, including on their personal social media accounts. When it came to BBC non-news presenters, on reflection, participants did not generally think the same standards applied categorically to these presenters when not on air or not under the BBC brand.

However, this support for freedom of expression was not unconditional, and impartiality was also considered important

Support for freedom of expression was not unconditional

Other considerations beyond freedom of expression were also felt to be important in this context, and this included impartiality. Support for freedom of expression for BBC non-news presenters on personal social media was therefore not unconditional.

Balancing the importance of impartiality and freedom of expression varied and depended upon a number of factors including: the individual participant's own world view; the sensitivity and divisiveness of the topic; the way a view was expressed; the perceived profile of the author; and their perceived expertise and knowledge on the topic. Where presenters were closely associated with the BBC, concerns over posts could also be heightened.

Reactions to social media posts were filtered through the individual's own beliefs

Judgements about both the acceptability and credibility of views expressed on social media were often based on whether a participant agreed or disagreed with the view itself.

If they agreed with a view, they were more likely to support (and in some cases, commend) its unrestricted expression and identify a reason to believe the credibility of the author.

If they disagreed with a view, some still felt freedom of expression was an important principle in the context of personal social media. But others could challenge this, and call for a form of governance, whether via the author self-regulating or by the social media platform or by the BBC if the author was closely associated with the brand, including prioritising adherence to impartiality.

Impartiality was considered more important for posts about politics or divisive social issues

Some topics tapped into divergent views and could activate audience sensitivities accordingly. Overtly political posts were the most controversial, particularly if they included explicit calls to action, and/or if the posts were around the time of elections or public votes. In this context, impartiality was generally viewed as being more important than freedom of expression. Divisive and politicised social issues were also areas where support for freedom of expression for non-news presenters on social media lessened.

The way views were conveyed could prompt participants to raise concerns regarding its unrestricted expression

How the view was expressed was also an important factor in the context of such posts. Posts with a strongly emotional tone (typically negative) in particular could be seen as relatively provocative, coming across as strongly partisan and 'tribal', or imposing the author's political views on others, or exhorting them to act politically in a certain way.

Being high profile was seen to come with greater responsibilities owing to reach and influence

Participants could perceive high-profile non-news presenters as having the potential power and influence to affect public opinion, owing to their reach and profile. This was seen to entail greater general responsibilities when it came to posting on social media. These responsibilities were often, but not always, independent of any perceived relationship with the BBC.

Perceived responsibilities included: not expressing abhorrent views, not engaging in personal attacks or inciting unlawful behaviour; taking care in what is said and how, particularly on politics and divisive issues; avoiding disseminating inaccurate information; and not directing people to act in a certain way.

Perceived expertise and knowledge granted more permission from participants to express views on topics

Although in general, participants felt no one should be restricted to expressing views only about topics they are knowledgeable about, impartiality was seen as more important if BBC non-news presenters expressed opinions on issues they aren't expert in, especially if participants disagreed with the view. In these cases, an author's credibility was more likely to be challenged.

Overall, perceived knowledge, expertise and/or passion about a topic could imbue the author with greater authority and credibility from the participants' perspective and provide more permission for non-news presenters to express their views on social media.

Few spontaneously associated non-news presenters' posts with the BBC, but some reputational risks did emerge around the BBC's commitment to both impartiality and freedom of expression

Some reputational risks for perceptions of the BBC and its impartiality did emerge

Few participants spontaneously made explicit links between posts from BBC non-news presenters and the BBC, and so many of the social media posts in themselves did not appear to have much impact on the BBC's reputation. However, there were some exceptions to this and some participants expressed concerns about the BBC's impartiality when non-news presenters more closely associated with the BBC posted on political or socially divisive issues.

Concerns about impartiality were more likely if a participant already perceived bias at the BBC. In these instances, such posts by non-news presenters, or the BBC's reaction to them, could be interpreted within this light and had the potential to confirm or reactivate perceptions of bias.

CONCLUSION

The research indicated that this is a subject where public opinion is nuanced.

Overall when reflecting on this subject, there was support in principle for freedom of expression for high-profile BBC non-news presenters when on their own personal social media accounts, and views expressed there by these individuals were not typically spontaneously thought to reflect on the BBC.

However, political and more divisive social issues were areas where impartiality was considered to be more important, and where participants were therefore more sensitive, especially if they disagreed with the view expressed.

And in general, participants felt being high profile came with greater responsibilities when sharing views on social media given the potential influence these individuals might have on public opinion.

As such, areas of tension between freedom of expression and calls for some form of governance did emerge.

Where presenters were closely associated with the BBC, concerns over posts (or the BBC's reaction to them) could be heightened and be more likely to bring reputational risks for the BBC.

2. Background and methodology

Background to the audience research

Review of BBC's social media guidance for on-air freelancers outside News

In March 2023, the BBC engaged John Hardie as an external, independent reviewer to review how its social media guidance applies to freelancers.

The review had the following terms of reference.

To review the BBC's guidance on 'individual use of social media' in relation to the personal social media use of those working in the on-air freelance community outside News, Current Affairs and Factual journalism. To consider options as to how it should be formulated.

To provide recommendations to the BBC as to how it could apply that guidance, considering the BBC's Charter commitments to both impartiality and freedom of expression. Future guidance must be easy to understand, practical and deliverable.

Audience research was commissioned as part of the review. This research was undertaken by Jigsaw Research.

Overall objectives of the audience research

This audience research aimed to explore whether the public feels BBC presenters working outside News, Current Affairs and Factual journalism (non-news presenters) should be able to express their views freely about political/social issues on their personal social media accounts.

Key questions explored in the research included:

- Do audiences think that non-news presenters should be free to express their views on social issues while not on air?
- Do audiences think non-news presenters should be able to endorse or criticise political parties?
- Do audiences think BBC non-news presenters should be held to the same standards of impartiality as BBC News journalists?
- Does it matter to audiences what opinions are expressed by non-news presenters?
- What is the impact of a non-news presenter sharing their opinions on social media on audience perceptions of the BBC and its impartiality?

Overall approach to the audience research

Jigsaw's audience research encompassed both qualitative and quantitative elements to deliver the research objectives:

- The qualitative element involved focus groups where nationally reflective participants considered the subject in detail.
- The quantitative element involved an online survey completed by over 3,000 nationally representative UK adults 16+.

As this was a subject where public opinion was nuanced, Jigsaw considered the qualitative evidence as the most insightful as participants had the opportunity to consider the subject in greater depth, and the qualitative element was able to explore and probe audience reactions to understand the drivers behind their responses.

Qualitative research element – focus groups

Overall approach to the qualitative research element

Eight online focus groups were conducted, convening a total of 48 people from eight locations across the UK.

The qualitative research explored participants' perceptions of social media posts from a range of freelance BBC non-news presenters posted on their personal social media accounts, and what impact, if any, this had on perceptions of the BBC and its commitments to impartiality and freedom of expression.

Research locations

The qualitative research was carried out across eight locations selected to include all four Nations and a mix of urban, suburban and some rural areas:

- Belfast
- Glasgow
- Edinburgh and Borders
- Cardiff
- Liverpool
- Lincolnshire
- Surrey
- London.

Sampling approach and design principles

A number of considerations were incorporated into the qualitative sample design to ensure the sample was broadly reflective of the UK adult population:

- An even split of gender in each group
- Age range included 18+
- A spread of socio-economic groups
- Representation of ethnic minority participants
- Representation of LGBTQ+ participants
- A range of political leanings
- Different favourability levels (low, medium, high) towards the BBC.

Given the subject matter under discussion, all qualitative participants used at least one social media platform.

Stimulus material

In total, 23 social media posts were used as stimulus material in the qualitative element. The posts were made by a range of BBC non-news presenters (sometimes referred to as 'authors' in this report) posting on their personal accounts. The posts covered a range of topics, including political, social and environmental issues. The posts also included a variety of different tones, styles and opinions.

Focus group structure and content

Before taking part in a focus group, each participant completed an individual online **pre-task**. The pre-task elicited open-ended reactions to around five of the social media posts per participant. Across the sample, all 23 social media posts were tested.

The rationale for the pre-task was to allow an opportunity to capture individual, private and spontaneous reactions to a range of social media posts, prior to any discussion in a group setting. This enabled the research to mirror the way in which individuals would normally interact with social media posts. The posts were shown without any reference to the BBC to help understand how participants spontaneously perceived them, allowing any potential issues to occur naturally without prompting.

In the **focus groups**, initial discussions built on pre-task responses, and continued to explore instinctive perceptions of and spontaneous, unprompted reactions to the social media posts (around five new posts were shown per group). Groups then moved into more informed and deliberative discussions, where posts were considered in relation to the BBC and its commitment to both impartiality and freedom of expression.

Each post was viewed by three to four groups across the research to enable the research to compare the reactions of different kinds of people to the same material. The order in which stimulus material was shown to participants was rotated in order to give each post an opportunity to be seen first.

Quantitative research element – questionnaire survey



Overall approach to the quantitative research element

A nationally representative survey was conducted online between 16th and 18th May 2023, involving 3,198 UK adults (16+). The sample was weighted to be nationally representative of UK adults in terms of nation and region, age, gender, working status, social grade, education and ethnicity.



Questionnaire content

- The questionnaire covered respondents' use, if any, of different social media platforms, plus their frequency of use of the BBC.
- Respondents were then asked a series of questions about 'high-profile BBC non-news presenters' and their personal social media accounts:
 - First of all, respondents were asked top-of-mind whether or not such presenters should be held to the same standards of impartiality as BBC News presenters and journalists when expressing their opinions on their own social media accounts.
 - Then respondents were shown details of the BBC's commitments to impartiality and freedom of speech:
There are rules that set out what the BBC needs to deliver to the UK public in return for the licence fee. In these rules, the BBC is committed to being impartial in its programmes, content and services. In these rules, the BBC is also committed to freedom of expression.
(NB: half of the respondents saw mention of 'impartiality' cited before 'freedom of expression'; half of the respondents saw mention of 'freedom of expression' cited before 'impartiality'.)
 - Following this, respondents answered a series of questions about the importance of impartiality vs. freedom of expression when BBC non-news presenters post on their own social media accounts. They were asked at an overall level; for a range of specific subject matters and topics; and by type of BBC non-news presenter.
 - Care was taken throughout to minimise any order impact by: rotating the question order; rotating mention of 'impartiality' or 'freedom of expression' first; randomising the specific topics covered; and by showing answer scales in alternate directions across respondents.
- The questionnaire also included screening and classification questions e.g. demographics and household circumstances.



3. Main findings

Spontaneous reactions to the social media posts often focused on the personal views of high-profile individuals and how they were expressed, and few were associated with the BBC

As outlined in the methodology section, all the social media posts used in the qualitative research as stimulus material were initially explored via an online pre-task with each individual participant seeing around five social media posts. The focus groups then began by building on pre-task responses, and continued to explore instinctive, unprompted reactions to the social media posts (including introducing new posts). In the pre-task and in these early stages of the focus groups, the social media posts were shown without reference to the BBC in order to understand how participants spontaneously perceived them.

Spontaneous reactions to posts often focused first on the view being expressed

At a spontaneous and general level, the qualitative research highlighted that participants' initial and instinctive reactions to the social media posts used as stimulus material first and foremost focused on the views being expressed in them. How participants individually felt about what was said was often their main reaction in terms of judging whether they agreed or disagreed with the view, and whether they thought that the view being expressed was 'right' or 'wrong' from their own perspective.

Beyond quickly judging how they felt about the view being expressed, a number of other factors also shaped how participants initially reacted to a given social media post used as stimulus material in the research. These including the following:

- **The sensitivity of the topic often determined the strength of reactions.** Some topics were more sensitive than others, and what could be perceived as political posts had greater potential to be provocative from an audience perspective. Some social issues could also activate audience sensitivities, whilst other topics, such as those relating to the environment for example, could be seen as more consensual and less controversial.

- **How the audience generally felt about the author also played an initial role in shaping reactions.** When considering the posts included in the qualitative element, participants recognised the authors to be high-profile public figures, and often regarded them as part of a general celebrity culture. They were generally seen as having an independent career or celebrity brand. The views expressed in tested posts were typically seen as coming from the individual as a personal opinion on a given topic, and were not typically associated directly with any organisations or brands. Participants' reactions tended to be shaped by whether they shared the same view on the topic as the author, whether they liked or disliked the author's personal brand and this also, in turn, shaped how they felt about the credibility of the post.
- **How the view was expressed and presented also shaped audience reactions.** Another factor determining the strength of audience reactions was the language and tone adopted by the author. Posts perceived to have a strong emotional tone and that were felt to use particularly emotive language (which was typically negative) could provoke stronger reactions. This was especially the case with posts that were articulating strongly negative views or perceived as expressing anger.
- **Presentational aspects could also make a difference to how audiences reacted.** For example, imagery played a role in some of the social media posts used as stimulus material, and some images could be seen as relatively questionable, in particular any imagery that appeared to be used to criticise a particular individual.

Participants rarely referenced the BBC spontaneously when reviewing the posts

Spontaneous reactions to posts rarely overtly referenced the BBC, and participants did not typically link the posts to the BBC or raise questions about the BBC's impartiality. Any spontaneous comments that did reference the BBC tended to be in relation to recent events surrounding a social media post by Gary Lineker reported in the media.

There was support in principle for freedom of expression for BBC non-news presenters on their own personal social media accounts

Personal social media was often seen as a platform for freedom of expression and opinion

Overall, at a general level the qualitative research highlighted that freedom of expression appeared to be the priority principle in the context of personal social media. For participants, in theory, everyone, no matter who they were, was entitled to express their personal views in such a context.

Participants felt that being opinionated on social media was a generally accepted norm, and the free expression of views was seen as one of the core purposes that social media played in people's lives and in wider society. There was therefore an expectation that people would freely express their views in this context, and that this space for opinion would be relatively unconstrained compared with other media contexts such as on-air broadcast output.

However, whilst there was general permission to express and share views on social media, participants felt that there were certain boundaries that were also important to be conscious of, primarily in terms of observing norms of common decency when communicating personal opinions.

The views being expressed were taken in the context of the author's personal account. This was seen as important in terms of clearly signalling that the author was expressing their own personal view, and not communicating on the behalf of any organisation or brand. In the context of a personal social media account, the author was seen as having the same right to freedom of expression as any other individual as a general principle.

Further evidence for this general support for the principle of freedom of expression could be observed amongst some participants who clearly disagreed with the views being expressed, but still felt that the author was entitled to express their views in this context.

Engaging with the authors and their views on social media was seen as a matter of personal choice

Participants felt that engaging with certain authors on social media was a matter of personal choice. Overall, there was felt to be a strong sense of individual choice and control over what you engage with on social media.

As engagement with authors on social media was seen as a matter of personal choice, participants tended to question the idea of anyone raising strong objections to personal views being shared in this particular communications context. Many participants felt that if a person objected to the view being expressed or the author expressing them, then they simply did not have to engage with the author and/or their views via their social media.

Furthermore, most participants generally felt that they were unlikely to follow authors that they knew they would disagree with. Most felt there was a strong tendency to follow authors that generally held the same views as they did, and on this basis, they would be unlikely to be exposed to a viewpoint that they might strongly object to. Again, engagement was seen as a matter of personal choice, and it was seen as straightforward for any individual user to disengage from the author and their posts if they wished to.

This general understanding that engagement was a matter of individual choice, the tendency to follow authors who shared similar views to oneself and the ability to easily disengage if you wished to all served to create further permission for freedom of expression in the context of personal social media.

Support in principle for freedom of expression for non-news presenters in the context of their personal social media accounts, and engaging was a matter of choice:

In participants' own words



General support for freedom of expression

Everybody's entitled to an opinion. You can like them or loathe them for it, but that's why we have freedom of speech. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

They're entitled to [have an opinion]. Just because you're famous doesn't mean you don't have an opinion. Whether other people don't like their opinion, but they may be passionate about what they're writing about, so to me, why can't they? (45-55, Surrey)

It's tricky, because you, kind of, have either freedom of speech or you don't. If you're going to censor what people say, it's like, how do you go about censoring what people can and can't talk about? (35-45, Cardiff)

I would assume because they're doing it from their personal account, you know, they're not using their BBC Twitter account, then it's fine. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

I'm totally comfortable with them saying whatever they like within the bounds of acceptability. As long as it's legal, obviously. I mean, I'm more than happy for them to express their views on any subjects they like. (35-45, Cardiff)

At the end of the day, regardless, they are who they are, these people are human beings with their own beliefs and stuff. Why should they mute themselves because they're in the public eye? (45-55, Surrey)

I think the nature of Twitter, as a platform, is that people go on there to express their personal opinion. I think that's obviously the whole point of it, so seeing people being opinionated on that platform is not shocking. (25-35, London)

We're all entitled to free speech, aren't we? Everybody's entitled to their opinion. Whether we agree with it or not is up to us. (55+, Lincolnshire)



Following and engaging on social media is a matter of choice

You do have a choice. You don't have to follow [author] on social media, and I don't. (55+, Lincolnshire)

That's the thing with social media, isn't it? People follow whose opinions they agree with anyway, so it spreads around, you know? I think if I read it and I don't care for it, I just don't do anything about it. I don't read repost, I don't comment, and I just move on. (45-55, Surrey)

I don't tend to look at things I don't agree with on Twitter, I suppose. I, again, the echo chambers. There's loads of stuff I don't agree with, and fair enough, [author] can express [their] own opinion however weird it can be. (35-45, Cardiff)

I don't really care because I have my opinion and I don't have to tell everyone my opinion, it's what I believe... I'm not really a [author] person anyway so it doesn't do anything for me. It doesn't impact. (45-55, Surrey)

On reflection, participants generally did not expect BBC non-news presenters to adhere to the same standards of off-air impartiality as BBC News journalists and presenters

Qualitative participants felt that different standards should be applied to BBC News journalists

Participants in the qualitative research felt that it was important that BBC News journalists and presenters did not express their personal views in general, but particularly about political and social issues. This was felt to apply in any media context, including personal social media. They felt that if BBC News journalists did reveal their personal opinions in any media context, this would undermine both trust and credibility in BBC News and confidence in its impartiality, and was likely to damage the BBC's reputation.

In the quantitative research, initially 59% of the survey respondents had spontaneously felt that high-profile BBC non-news presenters should be held to the same standards of impartiality as BBC News presenters/ journalists when expressing their opinions on their own social media accounts (20% disagreed and 22% neither agreed/disagreed or didn't know). However, survey respondents answered this question **before** considering the BBC's commitments to both impartiality and freedom of expression, and when asked to consider both impartiality and freedom of expression in relation to non-news presenters on social media, their responses were more nuanced, as the charts on slide 18 show. This is similar to the nuance in the views expressed by participants in the qualitative research who considered the issues in greatest depth – when they reflected on the subject in detail, they felt that different standards applied.

Overall, qualitative participants felt that BBC non-news presenters should adhere to the same impartiality standards on-air but not off-air

Participants felt that it was important that non-news presenters did not express their personal views about political and social issues when on-air. In such contexts, non-news presenters were seen as unequivocally representing the BBC, and that expressing their personal views on-air, particularly on political and social issues, would have a detrimental impact on public perceptions of the organisation and its impartiality.

When communicating on-air, or in clearly BBC-branded online contexts, non-news presenters were expected to adhere to similar standards of 'on-air' impartiality as BBC News journalists when it came to political and social issues. This was seen as categorically different from their personal social media accounts and they were not expected to adhere to these standards there. An 'off-air' exception to this would have been if the author had communicated the views on social media under the BBC brand.



Different standards apply to BBC News presenters/journalists

If it was a news reader that had posted about something, we would say, 'No, that's not on'. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

If you're a political broadcaster and you're delivering information to people, but then you have a very strong opinion about that, it creates real difficulties, doesn't it? (35-45, Cardiff)

Non-news presenters are not expected to adhere to the same standards when off-air

They're not related to the news and they're celebrities... if they're normal... presenters, then... they should be able to express it [their views on their own social media]. (45-55, Surrey)

They're posts which are separate from what they do as paid employees of the BBC. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

None of these people are, like, news presenters or reporters... I'm guessing they do mainly sort of entertainment shows. So I think, for me, that gives them a bit more leeway to just express their views freely (on their own social media). (25-35, London)

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "High-profile BBC non-news presenters should be held to the same standards of impartiality as BBC news presenters and journalists when expressing their opinions on their own social media accounts"? Base: All respondents (n=3,198)

However, whilst there was general support for freedom of expression on social media, both the qualitative and the quantitative research indicated this support was not unconditional

Other considerations beyond freedom of expression were felt to be important, and this included impartiality

The research demonstrated that this is a subject where public opinion is nuanced and finely balanced. In relation to personal social media posts from high-profile individuals, support for freedom of expression was not unconditional. Other considerations were also felt to be important in this context, including impartiality.

The **quantitative element**, as the next slide sets out, shows that survey respondents felt both freedom of expression and impartiality were important in terms of high-profile BBC non-news presenters posting on social media about political parties, politics and controversial social issues.

The **qualitative element** highlighted that balancing the importance of impartiality and freedom of expression depended upon a combination of different factors that were shaping participants' reactions. These factors included the following:



THE INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT'S OWN WORLD VIEW

Whether or not a participant's own views were aligned with the views of the author was an important determinant of whether they felt that freedom of expression or impartiality was the more important principle.



THE SENSITIVITY AND DIVISIVENESS OF THE TOPIC

Whether the topic was overtly political or a social issue subject to divergent viewpoints was also important. More sensitive topics were more likely to activate calls for greater impartiality, on balance.



THE WAY THE VIEW WAS EXPRESSED

Views that were expressed using strongly emotive language and that were perceived as angry, hostile or aggressive in tone could prompt participants to raise issues and concerns regarding its unrestricted expression.



THE PERCEIVED PROFILE AND REACH OF THE AUTHOR

Authors who were felt to have particularly high profiles and reach were seen as potentially influential on public opinion. Participants often felt that this potential influence came with certain responsibilities in what the authors said, and how they expressed their views, including on their personal social media.



THE AUTHOR'S PERCEIVED EXPERTISE AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE TOPIC

Participants felt that authors with recognised knowledge or expertise of a given topic had relatively greater permission to express their views freely on that topic. Impartiality was felt to be of increased importance if BBC non-news presenters expressed opinions on issues they weren't expert in.

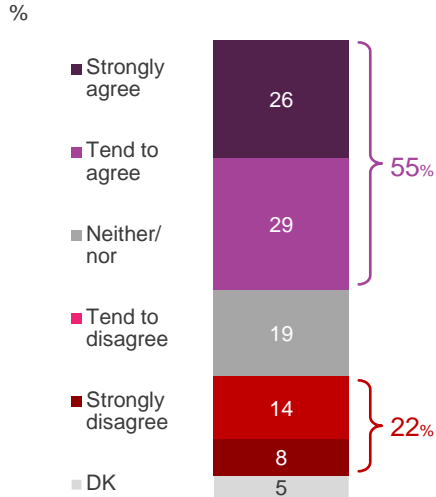


THE AUTHOR'S PERCEIVED ASSOCIATION WITH THE BBC

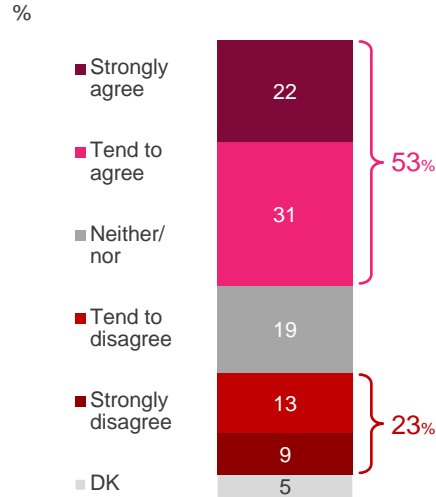
Few participants spontaneously made explicit links between the posts and the BBC itself. However, where presenters were closely associated with the BBC, concerns over posts could be heightened, and some reputational risks did emerge around the BBC's commitment to both impartiality and freedom of expression.

The quantitative research revealed that both freedom of expression and impartiality could be important in relation to expressing views on personal social media

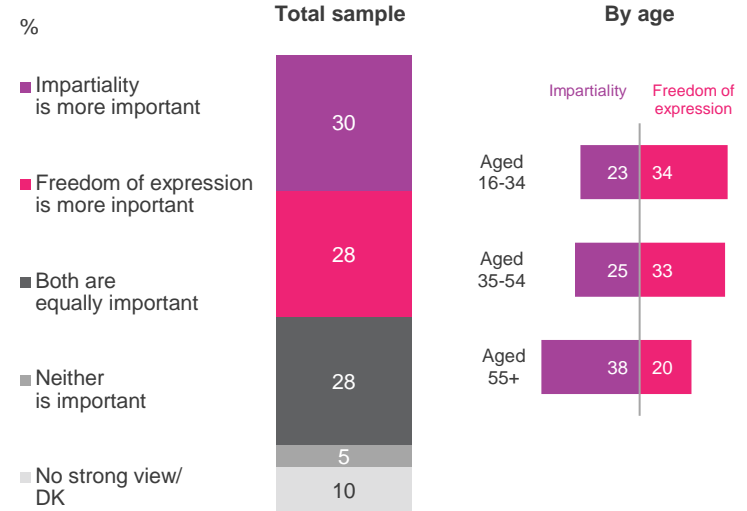
BBC impartiality is put at risk if high-profile BBC non-news presenters are seen to take sides on political parties, politics or on controversial social issues of the day on their own social media accounts



High-profile BBC non-news presenters have the right to freedom of expression when it comes to giving their views on political parties, politics or on controversial social issues of the day on their own social media accounts



Importance of Impartiality vs. Freedom of expression when high-profile BBC non-news presenters post on their own social media accounts



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement... BBC impartiality is put at risk if high-profile BBC non-news presenters are seen to take sides on political parties, politics or on controversial social issues of the day on their own social media accounts / High-profile BBC non-news presenters have the right to freedom of expression when it comes to giving their views on political parties, politics or on controversial social issues of the day on their own social media accounts.

Q. Thinking about high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes and what they post on their own social media accounts, on balance, which do you think is more important?

Base: All respondents – Total sample=3,198, Aged 16-34=928, Aged 35-54=1,097, Aged 55+=1,173

Whether or not a participant's own views were aligned with the views of the author shaped whether they felt that freedom of expression or impartiality was the more important principle

Reactions to social media posts were often filtered through the individual's own beliefs

When reviewing the social media posts by BBC non-news presenters used as stimulus material in the qualitative research, participants' judgements about the acceptability and credibility of the views expressed on social media were often based on whether or not the participant agreed or disagreed with the view being shared.

In cases where the participant agreed with the view, they tended to defend the author's right to express their view freely, and in some cases commend its unrestricted expression. In addition, if the participant agreed with the view being expressed, they were also more likely to see the view, and the author, as credible. In such instances, participants would often identify some reason to believe the author, regardless of whether this related to any recognised knowledge or expertise about the topic.

If the participant disagreed with the view expressed, they could be more inclined to question its unrestricted expression, and call for some form of governance to be applied. The suggested forms of governance would vary, but included the author self-regulating, the social media platform taking action, or the BBC taking action if the author was closely associated with the brand. This included adherence to some form of impartiality.

In such instances where participants disagreed with the views being expressed, they were also more likely to challenge the credibility and authority of the author to express a view on the topic. This typically involved identifying a reason to discredit the author's views, and often related to a perceived lack of recognised knowledge or expertise on the topic.

It is important to note that whilst this general pattern was observed across the sample, there were also cases where participants clearly disagreed with the views being expressed, but would still ultimately feel that freedom of expression was the more important principle in the context of a non-news presenter expressing their views on their personal social media account.



Reactions to posts shaped by the participant's own views on the topic

Below is an example of different participants within the same focus group reacting to the same social media post that was sharing a video on the topic of racism in cricket. The example illustrates how participants can make different evaluations of the content of a post based on their own personal views of the topic in question.

Participant 1: *The video was made because of racism within cricket, and there was a lot of problems... but I think that we have moved on as a country. I think we're the most accepting, multi-cultural, diverse country in the world... and all this that they're [author] throwing out there, I just feel that it's over the top.* (55+, Lincolnshire)

Participant 2 (responding to the above participant): *I don't really care whether it's [author] that does it, or somebody does it, but I completely disagree, sorry. I think that the more we highlight this kind of thing, the better we will get at it... I know that people are still struggling with living lives when they are black, ethnic. So I think anybody should be able to repost and post something like this, because if one person engages with it, that's one person whose view might change.* (55+, Lincolnshire)

The quantitative research also indicated that opinion can be affected by people's own take on the view being expressed. Within the survey, respondents were asked, when it came to high-profile BBC non-news presenters endorsing or criticising political parties/their policies/individual politicians on their own social media accounts, was impartiality or freedom of expression more important or were both equally important. On balance, respondents felt impartiality was more important than freedom of expression for such posts about politics but the skew towards impartiality was strongest if BBC non-news presenters were to endorse a party/their policies/individual politicians that the respondent did not support (see slide 22).

Impartiality was considered more important for posts about politics or divisive social issues



THE SENSITIVITY
& DIVISIVENESS
OF THE TOPIC

Political and 'politicised' posts were more likely to activate audience sensitivities

Posts on topics where there were marked differences of opinion, such as political posts, were more likely to activate audience sensitivities.

In the qualitative research, posts perceived to be overtly political proved most controversial, and where participants were most likely to raise issues around their unrestricted expression, particularly when the participant disagreed with the views being expressed. This was especially so when the post was perceived to be partisan in nature, or the language and tone being used was felt to be strongly emotive. Audience sensitivities relating to such topics and posts were often apparent regardless of any association with the BBC.

Examples of these more overtly political posts tended to be when the author was perceived to be critiquing or endorsing a political party, an individual politician, or the Government. They were most controversial if they included explicit calls to action, especially if the post was around the time of an election. In such cases, the posts were strongly criticised for attempting to influence the electoral process, and calling for some form of impartiality was generally seen as more important than freedom of expression.

In addition, participants could also question whether it was appropriate for the authors to express their endorsement or support for campaigning organisations, particularly ones that could be perceived as being controversial in some way.

Other topics, such as some posts covering sensitive social and cultural issues, also potentially activated audience sensitivities. Divisive and politicised social issues were therefore sometimes areas where support for freedom of expression for non-news presenters on social media also lessened.

This pattern of responses to different topics was very much borne out in both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the research.

The quantitative findings were nuanced (see charts on slides 22-25 for more detail) but indicated that when considering high-profile BBC non-news presenters posting on their own social media accounts, *on balance*:

- *Impartiality* was more important for respondents than freedom of expression when it came to politics and divisive social issues;
- *Freedom of expression* was more important for respondents than impartiality when it came to other social issues.

There were clear differences of opinion by age, with support for freedom of expression stronger among younger respondents and support for impartiality stronger among older respondents. Respondents aged 16-34 year olds always skewed towards freedom of expression – including in relation to politics and divisive social issues. Respondents aged 55+ always skewed towards impartiality – including on social issues.

The sensitivity and divisiveness of the topic: In participants' own words



Reacting to political or divisive posts in the stimulus material

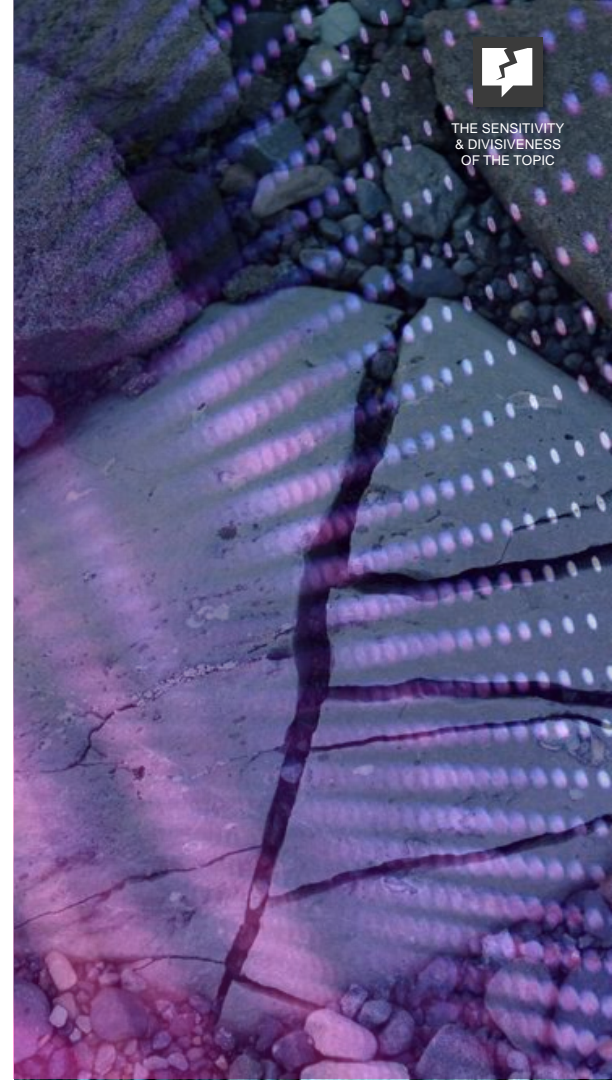
I think the [author] ones are trying to adversely influence people's decisions. So four out of the five [posts] are just people's opinions. [Author] ones are more about, 'You simply can't vote for him,' is trying to push [their] opinion too far, I think. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

I think these ones are pushing towards the... you know, unreasonable. [They're], kind of, making it personal against [politician] and trying to influence people by quoting what potentially has been said in the papers. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

The giveaway is the header [naming a campaigning organisation] at the top there, which shows how completely politicised, and who's actually promoting this, who's pushing this through [author]. That's what it looks like to me. (45-55, Surrey)

I think they're both quite divisive, sort of, commentators, aren't they? So, you're either for or against both those authors. And that is the danger, I think, with celebrities regurgitating posts is that if you're on the other camp, you're instantly against that opinion, if they're promoting it. (45-55, Surrey)

I thought it was too political, but just because somebody is in the public eye, or in the celebrity domain, thought that [they] could really push it out there. I thought it was about self, it was all about [their] own self gain, rather than what other people were going to get. [They] were pushing it from a political angle, from [their] own celebrity. (45-55, Surrey)



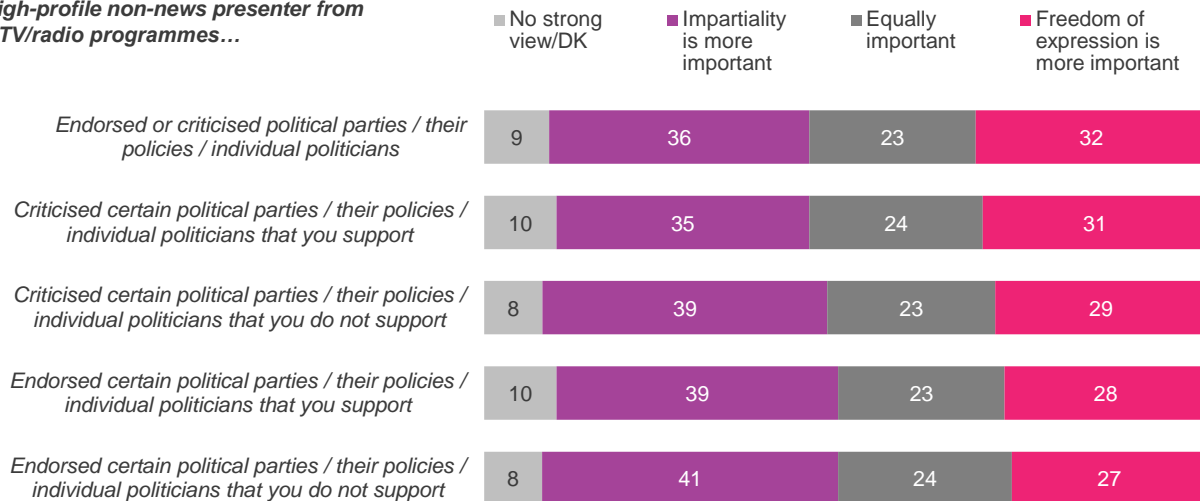
The quantitative research indicated that perceptions are finely balanced but impartiality was considered somewhat more important for posts about politics, especially if non-news presenters endorsed politics the respondent did not support

Importance of Impartiality vs. Freedom of expression in relation to *politics*

When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes posting on their own social media accounts, on balance, which comes closest to your view?

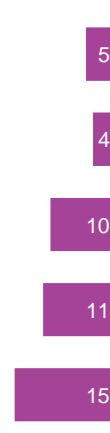
%

If a high-profile non-news presenter from BBC TV/radio programmes...



Overall leaning
Difference between
% saying 'Impartiality is more important' and
% saying 'Freedom of expression is more important'

Impartiality
Freedom of expression



Q. When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes... On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should avoid doing or be able to do on their own social media accounts? / On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should be able to do or avoid doing on their own social media accounts? Base: All answering each statement – Total sample=3,198/1,599

Rounding means % may not sum to 100. Rounding also accounts for any difference in the % overall leaning figures vs. a calculation made directly from the figures in the chart.

The quantitative results showed that impartiality was more important than freedom of expression in relation to politics for 55+ year olds compared with 16-34 and 35-54 year olds



THE SENSITIVITY
& DIVISIVENESS
OF THE TOPIC

Importance of Impartiality vs. Freedom of expression in relation to politics

Overall leaning %

Difference between % saying 'Impartiality is more important' and % saying 'Freedom of expression is more important'

If a high-profile non-news presenter from BBC TV/radio programmes...



Q. When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes... On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should avoid doing or be able to do on their own social media accounts? / On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should be able to do or avoid doing on their own social media accounts? Base: All answering each statement – Total sample=3,198/1,599, Aged 16-34=446-928, Aged 35-54=545-1,097, Aged 55+=572-1,173

Rounding means % may not sum to 100. Rounding also accounts for any difference in the % overall leaning figures vs. a calculation made directly from the figures in the chart.

The quantitative research also indicated that, again while finely balanced, freedom of expression was somewhat more important in relation to posts on social issues, but this lessened in relation to social issues where there is felt to be large-scale disagreement

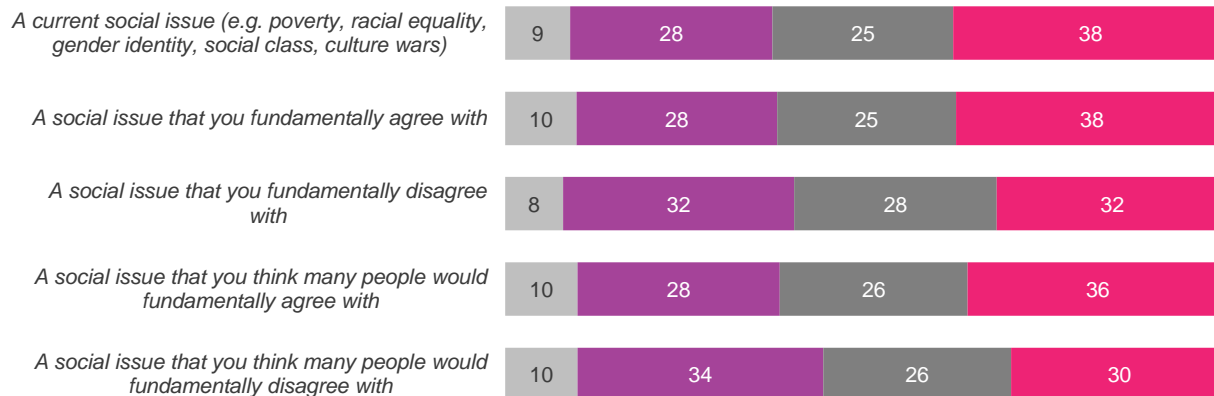
Importance of Impartiality vs. Freedom of expression in relation to *social issues*

When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes posting on their own social media accounts, on balance, which comes closest to your view?

%

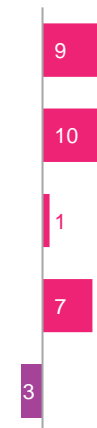
If a high-profile non-news presenter from BBC TV/radio programmes expressed a personal view on...

■ No strong view/DK ■ Impartiality is more important ■ Equally important ■ Freedom of expression is more important



Overall leaning
Difference between % saying 'Impartiality is more important' and % saying 'Freedom of expression is more important'

Impartiality Freedom of expression



Q. When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes... On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should avoid doing or be able to do on their own social media accounts? / On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should be able to do or avoid doing on their own social media accounts? Base: All answering each statement – Total sample=3,198/1,599

Rounding means % may not sum to 100. Rounding also accounts for any difference in the % overall leaning figures vs. a calculation made directly from the figures in the chart.

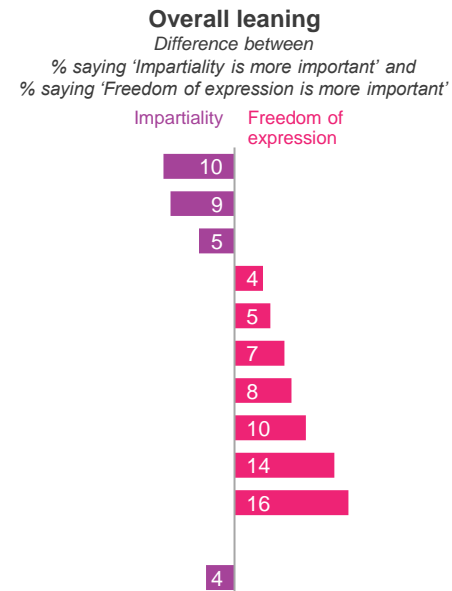
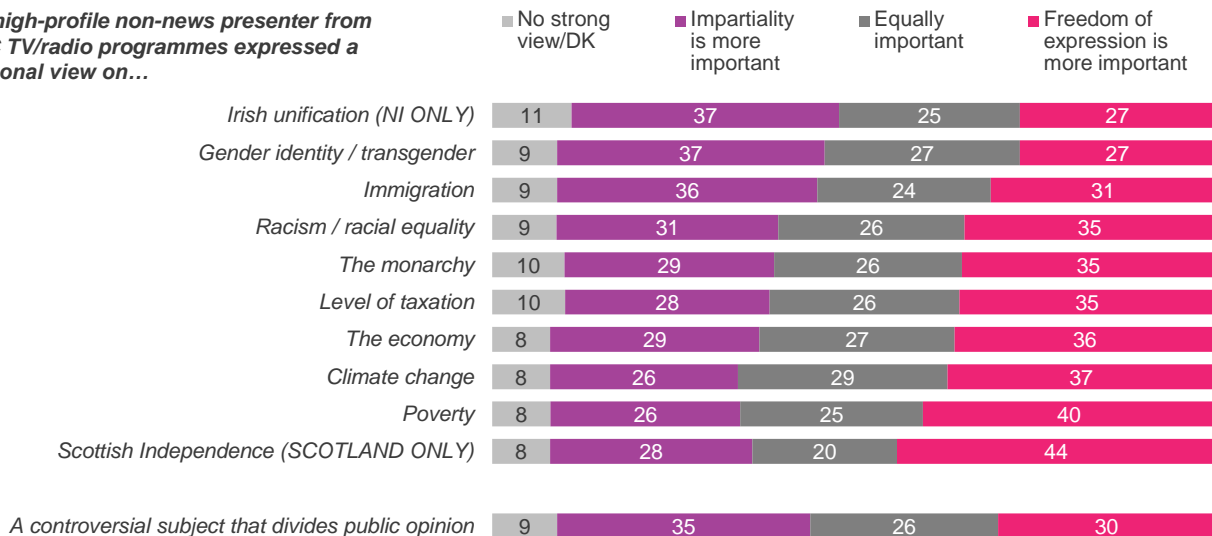
Impartiality was considered more important, on balance, in relation to more sensitive issues including gender identity and immigration, and controversial topics that divide public opinion

Importance of Impartiality vs. Freedom of expression in relation to *specific issues*

When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes posting on their own social media accounts, on balance, which comes closest to your view?

%

If a high-profile non-news presenter from BBC TV/radio programmes expressed a personal view on...



Q. When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes... On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should avoid doing or be able to do on their own social media accounts? / On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should be able to do or avoid doing on their own social media accounts? Base: All answering each statement – Total sample=313-3,198

Rounding means % may not sum to 100. Rounding also accounts for any difference in the % overall leaning figures vs. a calculation made directly from the figures in the chart.

The way a view was expressed could prompt participants to raise issues and concerns regarding its unrestricted expression



THE WAY THE VIEW
WAS EXPRESSED

The way the view was expressed was an important factor in shaping reactions to posts, and the perceived tone and tenor of posts could also activate audience sensitivities

When reviewing the social media posts used as stimulus material in the qualitative research, participants' reactions indicated that the emotional tone adopted by the author could also increase audience sensitivities towards such posts, particularly if the tone was a strongly negative one. Some posts were perceived as strongly partisan and 'tribal', having an attacking tenor behind the view, or could be seen as particularly aggressive towards a political figure.

In these instances, the post could be seen as the author venting their personal feelings of anger. For some participants, the forcefulness with which such opinions were expressed could also sometimes feel like the author was imposing their political views upon others or encouraging them to act politically in a certain way.

In light of the above, some participants suggested that the authors should take into account the following when expressing views on more controversial or sensitive topics:

- The sensitivity of the topic they were commenting on ;
- That not everyone may share their own point of view on the topic ;
- The emotional tone of their post and how this may have an impact on the audience.

Some participants felt that the authors should think about articulating a more considered and dispassionate argument, including using a less emotionally charged tone and less potentially provocative language.

The way the view was expressed: In participants' own words



They [author] deliberately picked a picture where it appears they're just standing laughing at us, or laughing at everybody. That was to raise anger. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

I think [author] came across quite angry. Like, in the post [they] put the angry face and stuff. I think [they were] forcing [their] opinion on others. (45-55, Surrey)

Well, it's a bit, although it's true, I mean, I agree with what [they're] saying, it's quite cruel really. It's very personal. I don't like to see personal posts attacking other people. (35-45, Cardiff)

Being high profile was felt to come with greater responsibilities when communicating on social media, owing to perceived reach and influence

High-profile non-news presenters could be seen as influential, and participants felt that this influence came with responsibilities when communicating on social media

Participants in the qualitative research could perceive authors of the posts they reviewed as stimulus material as high-profile celebrities whose profile meant that they could be influential in terms of public opinion. Both the qualitative and quantitative elements indicated that this reach and influence was often seen to exist in relation to being high profile irrespective of whether they worked for the BBC or their frequency of being on air on the BBC.

Participants in the qualitative element generally described many of the authors of the posts they reviewed as being well-known. Their reputation could be based on a previous career in various fields. It could also be based on their work for other broadcasters. Their work for the BBC could also contribute to their high profile.

In light of their high profile, participants generally felt that what authors said on social media could be influential, and that they could be listened to by large numbers of people. Participants felt that the potential power and influence stemming from their profile and reach therefore entailed greater levels of responsibility when it came to communicating on their personal social media account.

From the participants' perspective, everyone was seen as having responsibilities in terms of how they expressed themselves on social media. However, this sense of responsibility grew in relation to influence. Participants therefore felt that high-profile non-news presenters needed to be particularly mindful of these responsibilities in how they approached this area of communication. These responsibilities were often, but not always, independent of any perceived relationship with the BBC. This was because of the range of factors that could be seen as having built their profile: success in a previous career; work for other broadcasters as well as work for the BBC.

There was a consensus on what these greater responsibilities entailed

Perceived responsibilities included the following:

- Adhering to basic norms of decency and not expressing abhorrent views that were commonly felt to be unacceptable;
- Avoiding making personal attacks that were directed towards an individual;
- Not inciting or encouraging violent or unlawful behaviour;
- Avoiding disseminating false or inaccurate information;
- Avoiding being too provocative in message and tone;
- Exercising due sensitivity about the view that they were expressing and how it is expressed, particularly on politics and more sensitive and controversial topics;
- Not directing the audience to act in a certain way, particularly voting.

On this last point, participants felt it was particularly important that such influential authors did not interfere with the democratic and electoral process by directing the public to cast their vote in a certain way, especially during an election period.

In addition to the above responsibilities, some participants also felt that, in light of their reach and influence, the authors had a responsibility to raise awareness of issues that could be seen as in the public interest. For example, if the author became aware of an important societal issue that needed to be brought to public attention, then some participants felt that they had an obligation to use their public profile and reach to raise awareness around the issue.

The perceived reach and influence of the authors: In participants' own words



Responsibilities that come with being high profile

It's [the author's] opinion, you know, promoted as cast iron fact, and the dangerous thing is, by the time it gets to [their] viewers that agree with [them], they'll interpret it as fact (45-55, Surrey)

It totally is, because you're getting influenced... [Author] I think... [they've got] about 2 million ... That's a massive audience, you know. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

They've got, obviously, a wide reach and we know them from other contexts. So, they've already built up an audience... I think the fact that they've already got a big audience helps influence because you either like them or you don't, before they've even tweeted. (35-45, Cardiff)

I think they're people that feel that people will listen to them because of their status in the world, you know, they think they're something because [they're] a [presenter], that somebody will listen to [them] and agree with [them]. (55+, Lincolnshire)

[The author has] got personal opinions. But they've also got legions of easily influenced followers that are now taking up their opinions. That's what I find dangerous about it all. It's difficult to challenge, isn't it? (45-55, Surrey)

I would like to think that the people in this position would have just enough common sense to know where the boundaries lie... Where that line lies is very difficult to say. (35-45, Cardiff)



Perceived expertise granted more permission for high-profile non-news presenters to express their views on relevant topics



Credibility was attributed to the authors in a variety of different ways

Perceptions of credibility could be attributed to various different sources or attributes relating to the author. These perceived sources and attributes of credibility included the following:

- **Subject matter knowledge:** If the author was recognised as having specific subject matter knowledge and expertise in relation to the topic they were commenting on. Sometimes perceptions of the author being knowledgeable could also be attributed to their reputation for being committed and passionate about a certain topic.
- **Perceived character traits:** For example, whether the author was perceived as intelligent, likeable, passionate, or simply outspoken.
- **The author's own experiences and achievements:** For example, if they had had a successful career, in any field, this could give them a greater perceived authority in general, simply by virtue of being successful.
- **Identity-related attributes:** These could also be a source of credibility for the audience, giving an author's view a degree of existential authority. For example, if they were known to be LGBTQ+ and they were expressing a view on LGBTQ+ issues.
- **Perceived motivations:** These were also often a source of credibility for participants, as they tried to discern whether the motivations of the author were genuine in their concern for a given issue, or whether they suspected other motivations, for example whether commercial or being seen as an instance of self-promotion.

However, perceived expertise granted more permission from participants for the authors to express views on relevant topics

Although, in general, participants felt no one should be restricted to expressing views only about topics they were knowledgeable about, both qualitative participants and quantitative respondents felt that perceived subject matter knowledge and expertise did strengthen the credibility of an author's opinion on a given topic and garnered more permission for them to express their view freely.

The quantitative research highlighted that, on balance, when posting on their own social media accounts, freedom of expression was considered more important if non-news presenters were commenting on areas of expertise. Impartiality was felt to be more important if they were commenting on areas they were not experts in (see the next slide).

In the qualitative element, impartiality was also seen as of heightened importance if BBC non-news presenters expressed opinions on issues they were not expert in, especially in cases where participants disagreed with the view being expressed, and the topic was a matter of divergent views or controversy.

In addition, the qualitative research indicated that if participants disagreed with an author's views, they tended to challenge the author's credibility and authority to express that view. In such instances, participants would identify a specific attribute as a reason to disbelieve the author, and this often included the author not being recognised as knowledgeable or expert about the topic they were commenting on.

In sum, perceived knowledge and expertise, and sometimes passion and commitment on a topic, were seen as important attributes for the audience, and could imbue the author with greater authority and credibility. This, in turn, provided more permission for non-news presenters to express their views on social media.

In the quantitative research, freedom of expression was considered more important when non-news presenters comment on areas of expertise; impartiality was considered more important when they comment on areas they are not experts in



THE AUTHOR'S
PERCEIVED EXPERTISE
& KNOWLEDGE OF
THE TOPIC

Importance of Impartiality vs. Freedom of expression in relation to *other issues*

When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes posting on their own social media accounts, on balance, which comes closest to your view?

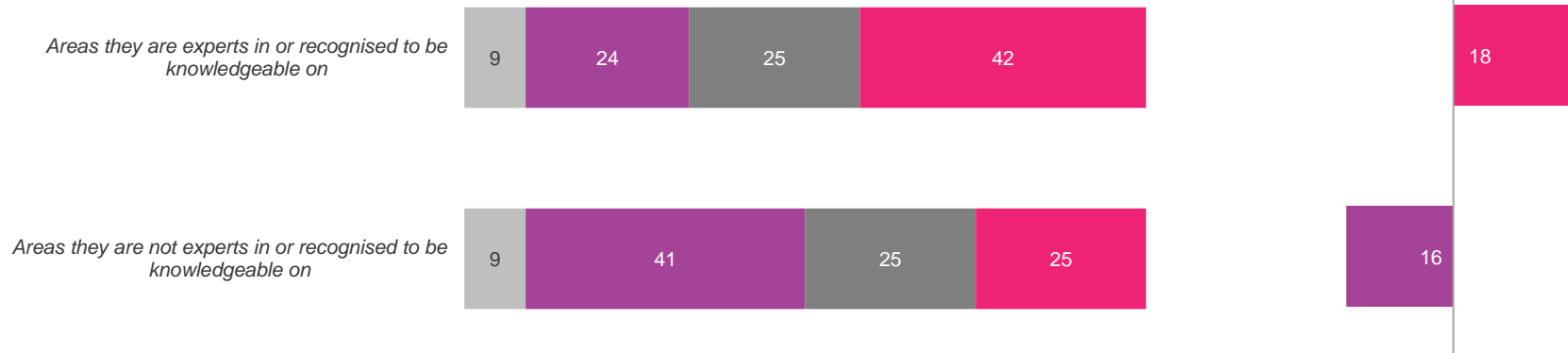
%

If a high-profile non-news presenter from BBC TV/radio programmes expressed a personal view on...

■ No strong view/DK ■ Impartiality is more important ■ Equally important ■ Freedom of expression is more important

Overall leaning
Difference between
% saying 'Impartiality is more important' and
% saying 'Freedom of expression is more important'

Impartiality Freedom of expression



Q. When considering high-profile non-news presenters from BBC TV/radio programmes... On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should avoid doing or be able to do on their own social media accounts? / On balance, which comes closest to your view on what they should be able to do or avoid doing on their own social media accounts? Base: All answering each statement – Total sample=3,198

Perceived expertise and knowledge of a topic: In participants' own words



A range of perceived sources of credibility

I think that counts for anybody who has any expertise in any field. I think you're going to listen to somebody who knows what they're talking about, like [author] is obviously... I think that just applies to anybody. If they're knowledgeable in a certain area, you would take notice of what they say, I think. (35-45, Cardiff)

A lot of these people are just talking just to up their profile. I think with [author], I know that [they] really do care about [the topic] so... [they've] got a good point. (55+, Lincolnshire)

I think [they've] shown that [they] do [have knowledge of politics]. It might not be [their] area of expertise, but I think that over time [they've] shown that [they] do know what they're talking about. (35-45, Cardiff)

There is going to be a lot of people who will say, 'Oh [author] is saying this, so it must be, you know, [they] know, [they're] on the TV every week, [they] must know what [they're] talking about.' I don't think [they] know much more than what I do about it... I share the same opinion with [them], but I wouldn't go on social media and try and promote it because I don't know enough about it. (55+, Edinburgh/Borders)

I know they're a smart, intelligent, independent [person], clever, I respect and value [their] opinion which tends to ally with what my own opinion is, but there's a personality that comes with that as well, and a personality that I kind of favour. (35-45, Cardiff)



Few spontaneously associated non-news presenters' posts with the BBC; however, some reputational risks did emerge around the BBC's commitment to both impartiality and freedom of expression

Few participants spontaneously made explicit links between the posts from BBC non-news presenters and the BBC itself

As explained on slide 10, in the qualitative element of the research the pre-task and early stages of the focus groups explored participants' instinctive reactions to the social media posts used as stimulus material. At this point, the posts were shown without reference to the BBC in order to understand how participants spontaneously perceived them.

This highlighted that, individually and collectively, the posts were spontaneously seen as emanating from high-profile and independent celebrity figures who were expressing their views in the context of their personal social media, and posts were not necessarily associated with the BBC.

Many of the authors were often seen as having careers independent of the BBC, and some were known to work for other broadcasters. If the BBC was thought of, any perceived relationship tended to be relatively loose, and in light of this, what the authors said on their personal social media accounts often did not spontaneously raise issues for the BBC's reputation, including perceptions of its impartiality.

Furthermore, when the authors were known to work for the BBC, their role was usually associated with various entertainment/other genres, rather than news and current affairs. As participants' reflections on slide 16 show, this also meant that there were fewer expectations that non-news presenters would adhere to the same standards as BBC News journalists when expressing their views on their personal social media.

However, whilst associations with the BBC often did not emerge spontaneously, there were some exceptions to this with more familiar presenters and particularly in relation to a recent social media post by Gary Lineker reported in the media. In such instances, some participants expressed concerns about the BBC's impartiality when authors posted on politics or socially divisive issues, especially if the participant disagreed with the views expressed.

Some posts had potential to influence perceptions of the BBC

Few participants spontaneously perceived posts on non-news presenters' personal social media accounts viewed in the research to represent the views of the BBC. However, some reputational risks for perceptions of the BBC and its impartiality did emerge.

Where presenters were closely associated with the BBC, concerns over posts could be heightened. This tended to be in relation to posts of a perceived political or socially divisive nature. Such posts were more likely to activate divergent views and audience sensitivities, and could confirm a participant's pre-conceptions of the BBC, including their perceptions of potential bias at the organisation. Concerns about impartiality were therefore more likely if a participant already perceived a bias at the BBC, and consequently interpreted the post by a non-news presenter within that context, confirming their pre-conceptions of the BBC.

An additional reputational risk for the BBC apparent in the research was how the BBC was seen to react, or not react, to such posts. Some participants could criticise the BBC for not being consistent and impartial in its approach to social media posts when it was perceived as reacting to a recent high-profile post but not to other posts in the past that could also be regarded as questionable by participants. Perceived lack of consistency could activate concerns about bias and prompt questions about the BBC's commitment to freedom of expression in terms of why there was a response to some posts but not to others.

In summary, many of the social media posts by BBC non-news presenters in themselves were not spontaneously associated with the BBC and therefore did not appear to have much impact on the BBC's reputation. However, some more political posts by more high-profile presenters closely associated with the BBC could activate concerns about the BBC's impartiality, and confirm or reactivate pre-conceptions of bias at the BBC. In addition, how the BBC was seen to react to certain posts also raised reputational risks for the organisation both in terms of its commitments to impartiality and freedom of expression.

Perceived association with the BBC: In participants' own words



Few spontaneous links with the BBC

I'm never going to associate their [authors'] own personal views with the views of the BBC. I mean, obviously most of them are entertainers. That's not their job to do news. I'm happy for them to say whatever they like, wherever they like. (35-45, Cardiff)

I don't really think that, you know, for example, [author's] opinion is the opinion of the BBC. I wouldn't put two and two together with that. For me, it's just their personal opinion. (25-35, London)

[Authors], they're successful in their own fields. You know, [author] presents a BBC show but they're also on [other radio station]. So, for me, I don't necessarily think of all of these people instantly with a link to the BBC. (35-45, Cardiff)

They're [authors] just represented their own views as individuals, and they're entitled to their own opinions, and I'm not going to see the BBC, as a whole, being biased, one way or another. (35-45, Cardiff)



Reputational risks for perceptions of the BBC

The BBC...so it's the British Broadcasting Corporation... they should represent the whole of Britain. (55+, Lincolnshire)

If they [authors] lose their objectivity, they're losing it on behalf of the people they work for. You can't say, 'We want to maintain an objective BBC,' then allow your people to express extreme political opinions. Unfortunately, with great power comes great responsibility and they've got quite a lot of influence and power. (55+, Lincolnshire)

They [authors] are public figures. They are lucky... to be able to do what they do. So, I think they do need to take a little bit of responsibility and we can't just say because they're not permanent employees of the BBC that they can tweet about anything. (35-45, Cardiff)

What does affect my view is how the BBC reacts to the tweets of these people. (35-45, Cardiff)

About the impartiality rules... It shouldn't be one rule for one, and then one rule for everybody else. (35-45, Cardiff)



THE AUTHOR'S
PERCEIVED
ASSOCIATION WITH
THE BBC



4. Summary conclusion

Whilst there was support in principle for freedom of expression in the context of the personal social media accounts of high-profile BBC non-news presenters, support was not unconditional, and some form of governance was seen as appropriate in certain cases

On reflection, there was support in principle for freedom of expression for high-profile non-news presenters when on their own social media accounts

Overall, when reflecting on the subject, participants were generally supportive of the principle of freedom of expression when a non-news presenter was expressing an opinion on their personal social media account. When considering the subject in depth, participants generally did not expect BBC non-news presenters to adhere to the same standards of off-air impartiality as BBC News journalists and presenters.

The views expressed by BBC non-news presenters on their own social media accounts were not typically spontaneously thought to reflect on the BBC

Social media posts tested in the qualitative research were typically seen as coming from high-profile and independent individuals who were expressing views in the context of their own social media accounts. Participants rarely spontaneously associated the views expressed there by non-news presenters with the BBC. Where this did occur, it tended to be in relation to posts by BBC non-news presenters more closely associated with the BBC, and especially where there had been recent related media coverage prior to the research.

In general, participants felt being high profile came with greater responsibilities when sharing views on social media given the potential influence

From participants' perspective, everyone was seen as having responsibilities in terms of how they expressed themselves on social media, but this sense of responsibility was seen to grow in relation to potential influence on public opinion.

Political and potentially divisive social topics were areas where impartiality was considered to be more important, and where audience sensitivities were apparent

Posts on topics where there were marked differences of opinion, such as political posts, were more likely to activate audience sensitivities. In these instances, participants could place greater importance on impartiality, particularly if they disagreed with the view expressed.

Areas of tension between freedom of expression and calls for some form of governance therefore did emerge

In light of both the responsibilities entailed with reach and influence, and also the perceived divisive nature of political and sensitive topics, some instances elicited calls for some form of governance in relation to relevant posts. The potential forms of governance ranged from the author self-regulating, the social media platform taking action, or the BBC taking action if the author was closely associated with the brand. This included adherence to some form of impartiality.

Where presenters were closely associated with the BBC, concerns over posts could then be heightened and be more likely to pose reputational risks for the BBC

Whilst participants did not often spontaneously perceive posts on non-news presenters' personal social media accounts to represent the views of the BBC, some posts had the potential to confirm pre-conceptions of perceived bias at the organisation among some participants. Where this did occur it tended to be in relation to posts of a political or socially divisive nature from non-news presenters more closely associated with the BBC. And for those participants with pre-existing perceptions of BBC bias, posts by non-news presenters or the BBC's reaction to those posts could be taken within that context and could be seen to confirm those pre-conceptions of the BBC.

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