

STRAT7



Review of the impartiality of BBC coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt

Audience Research Report

November 2022



impartiality

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Executive summary

This research sought to explore UK audiences' perceptions of fairness and impartiality in BBC output covering taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt

The BBC's impartiality action plan, announced in October 2021, includes BBC Board-commissioned thematic reviews of output in key areas of public debate. These reviews are designed to assess whether the BBC is meeting the required standards of impartiality and accuracy across BBC UK content including the devolved Nations.

The first review focuses on BBC's output relating to taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt, covering the BBC's UK public service radio, television and online content.

This audience research was commissioned as part of the inputs to this first review.

The objective of the research was to explore if and how UK audiences perceive BBC output to achieve fairness and impartiality in its output relating to taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt

The specific topics in scope included:

- Taxation – specifically income tax and VAT
- Public spending in three areas – Health, Transport and the Penal System
- Government borrowing and debt.

A two-stage qualitative approach was commissioned to deliver the research objective.

The research was conducted over July-October 2022.

A total of 127 people took part in the research from 24 locations across the UK.

Participants were recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population. To this end, the sample included a spread of ages, socio-economic groups, ethnicity, and gender, as well as a range of political leanings that were reflective of each location. As far as possible, the research included different kinds of location per nation. The sample also included participants with different levels of self-defined interest in and knowledge of the topics under consideration.

The research explored audience perceptions across a range of genres including news output, and also drama, comedy, soap operas/continuing dramas, and factual output.

As part of the research, 133 pieces of BBC content across news and other genres were explored with participants. These were mainly from October 2021 to March 2022, the period for content identified at the start of the thematic review.

Personal background and experience were the most significant factors informing views on tax and public spending. News was the most influential media genre

The research highlighted that personal background and direct experience were the most influential factors informing participants' views on the topics under consideration

For many participants in the research, their own personal background (e.g. where they came from, their education, their working life) and direct personal experiences (e.g. of paying income tax, of using the NHS) were often the starting point, and ultimately what many relied upon when expressing a view or opinion on these topics.

A participant's intuitive feel for a subject based on these background factors and experiences was often used to help evaluate other information, including the news, and they could respond positively or negatively towards information depending on whether it confirmed or contradicted their views.

Beyond personal experience, news was the most significant media genre

The audience research indicates that when it comes to media, news is significantly the most influential genre in informing views on taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt. And for news, impartiality is a core criterion for all audiences.

There was evidence that other genres (dramas, documentaries, and comedies) can inform audience opinions on the topics in scope, but this is to a much lesser extent than news. In addition, impartiality was generally not considered to be a core criterion for these genres, though for factual content there was a higher expectation of rigour and robust evidence.

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For me, it stems from your class status, your upbringing, your geographical location that are not necessarily informed by the media. I grew up in working class family in the north and my view on these topics are from my own political and moral compass that forms my views on these topics.

(Male, 25-34, BC1, London, Higher*)

I think if you are either waiting for something in health or you need to use transport, your views are going to be swayed by how long you're waiting, how good a service you're getting.

(Female, 25-34, BC1, Dundee, Lower)

The healthcare side of things, you always hear about it on social media or on the radio. Even today I saw something saying, 'Please avoid A&E because the waiting times are really long, because they are so busy and because of funding and everything, and lots of staff have left because they haven't been paid very well' and I've also been hearing from friends that have been waiting a long time.

(Female, 25-34, C1C2, East Anglia, Lower)

...on social media someone had tagged some news article that showed on a graph the price fuel was then and what it is now and the tax that had been added on over time and that was really shocking.

(Male, 35-44, C2DE, Dumfries, Medium)

To me, it's good reliable news sources that you rely on, so many use the internet and there are so many areas that are unreliable, so it's sources that I trust. If I was looking I would go to BBC and Sky. I wouldn't with the papers because they write what they want to write.

(Male, 35-54, BC1, Gillingham, Medium)

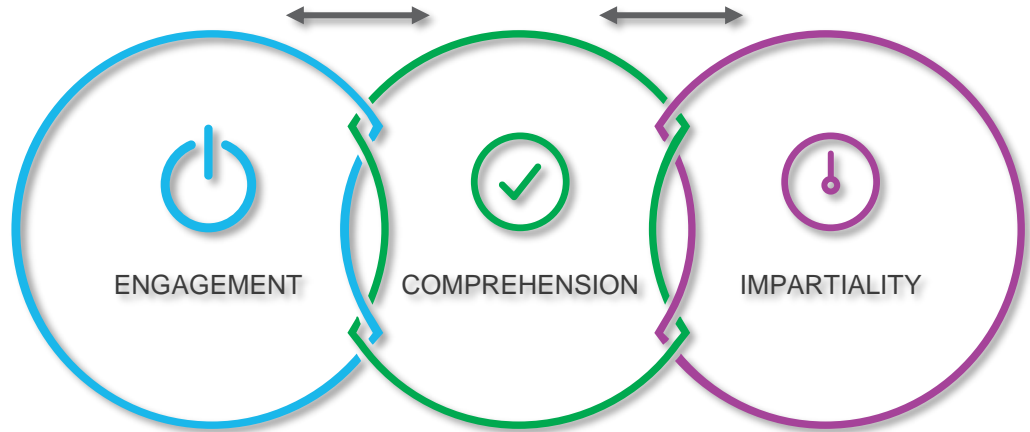
Attitudes to the topics in scope, and reactions to related news reporting, were shaped at three main interrelated levels

Three interrelated factors helped to shape attitudes

Attitudes to tax, public spending, and government borrowing and debt, as well as reactions to news reporting on these subjects, were shaped at three interrelated levels – **engagement**, **comprehension** and **perceptions of impartiality**.

Owing to the complex nature of these topics, engagement and comprehension often presented the main challenges for the majority of participants, and were often prerequisites to judging impartiality of output.

Therefore, engagement and especially comprehension challenges affected how participants were able to assess impartiality. Where there was low engagement, this meant low comprehension; low comprehension also meant low engagement (and, for some, active disengagement); low engagement and comprehension hindered the participant's ability to assess impartiality.



Engagement with and comprehension of the topics in scope varied across participants, and could present challenges for many

Engagement

Engagement with the topics in scope was driven by three main factors:

- **Personal relevance:** this was often the primary driver of attention among participants, and was typically defined by participants in quite pragmatic terms. Participants' primary need was to know how the topic would impact them.
- **Emotional resonance:** whether a topic area activated strong feelings amongst the sample was also a driver of engagement.
- **Accessibility:** this was the degree to which participants felt able to understand the topics enough to make engagement worthwhile.

Real-world, felt experiences dominated attention, while the world of macroeconomics felt distant. Reporting needed to connect more 'distant' topics with real-world experiences.

Engagement levels varied widely across the specific topic areas in scope of the research, and in light of this, there was a need to engage audiences using various means. These included explaining the personal impact of a story, conveying the news through relatable human stories, and using more informal or colloquial language.

However, engaging techniques could sometimes be in tension with other criteria important to audiences, such as impartiality. For example, too much focus on relatable human stories could be seen as over-emphasising subjective experience, or using language that was too informal could be perceived to lack credibility. Editorial approaches need to be conscious of this balance.

Comprehension

Comprehension of the topics in scope was a significant challenge for most participants. Direct personal experiences were often the starting point for understanding, and participants would derive their views and interpretation of the pertinent issues from their own direct encounters with the relevant services. Beyond this, however, comprehension of tax, public spending, and government borrowing and debt was challenging for the majority of participants.

The research indicated the topics in scope can be challenging for many participants to understand fully, and these underlying comprehension challenges therefore extended to participants' understanding of related BBC coverage. Reports featuring macroeconomic and fiscal analysis were typically the most challenging for participants to understand (although those with self-defined higher understanding were more comfortable). The potential to understand these complex aspects via the news was made harder when participants were often primarily engaging in this news content in snap shots and at headline level only. Furthermore, many participants expressed a reluctance to invest the time and effort in understanding topics that were perceived to be too complex or that could be hard to relate to their own lives.

There was some appetite for more explanatory and educational output that would help raise baseline understanding. While participants didn't want to feel patronised, they were comfortable admitting a lack of understanding, and welcomed being educated as well as informed by news in this context. Such content would need to be included within and wherever they are currently consuming the news.

Third-party expert input was often valued in aiding comprehension, and also improved perceptions of impartiality by adding an 'independent' perspective. However, participants had low awareness of their credentials, and experts did not always bring clarity. The research indicates that experts need more introduction and positioning in output, and that they have room to improve how they communicate with the public.

Impartiality was a key criterion for news. Participant perceptions were shaped by a number of factors, but in general BBC output on these topics did not raise significant concerns about bias

Impartiality

Elements of impartiality were integral to participants' notions of good quality news and their instinctive definitions of impartiality prioritised including different (and a range of) views, covering both or all sides, and doing so in a fair, balanced and neutral way. Reactions to the concept of 'due impartiality' revealed points of overlap with participants' own definitions of impartiality, but also underlined the importance of trusting the news source to make the right editorial judgements in applying due impartiality appropriately.

Although low engagement and comprehension could impede participants' ability to assess impartiality, three overlapping factors fed into audience judgements of impartiality:

Overall perceptions of the news source

Participants highlighted a number of key strengths relating to BBC News, including fair and balanced reporting, high standards and being good at explaining stories. These attributes were also confirmed when they reviewed much of the specific stimulus material for this project.

When it came to these topics and the reporting tested in the research, BBC News was generally not considered to have a particular point of view or political bias on these areas.

However, a minority of participants did hold negative pre-conceptions of BBC News stemming from BBC coverage that they recalled of other specific topic areas, especially political reporting. A range of different and often contrasting political biases could be projected onto BBC News depending on the participants' own political leanings. These could influence some participants' judgements and could be quite entrenched, even in light of what could be regarded as fair reporting on the topics in scope. Such pre-conceptions also partly stemmed from coverage of the BBC in the wider media and on social media. Instances where perceptions of political bias were activated by reporting on the topics in scope tested in the research were relatively rare though.

Feelings and views about the specific story

Compared with previous research (e.g. Ofcom 2022*), tax, public spending, and government borrowing and debt were less emotionally activating topics for participants. In general, these topics did not tend to trigger identity or partisan sensitivities that earlier research has shown can drive strong reactions and influence perceptions of impartiality.

In relatively rare instances, some sensitivities were activated in response to the reporting tested. Participants in Scotland, in particular, where the topics in scope more readily mapped onto political identities and divides in the context of Scottish politics, demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to the topics compared with other groups.

Lower levels of engagement and comprehension meant participants were less likely to hold strong views about the topics in scope. When coupled with lower emotional sensitivity towards the topics, participants therefore tended to be less activated by reports on the topics in scope.

In addition, given comprehension challenges, participants were more likely to defer to the perceived authority and expertise of the news report.

Reactions to how the specific story was reported

A range of editorial level attributes were also used by participants as short cuts for assessing impartiality. These included more objectively assessed 'harder' signals, such as leading with central 'facts and figures' in reporting, and also more intuitively judged 'softer' signals, such as tone of voice.

Participants typically focused on four main attributes to determine the impartiality of the output tested: including a range of views; questioning and challenging views; covering different sides; and perceptions of overall balance. In light of engagement and comprehension challenges of the topics in scope, they judged the impartiality of reports based on the presence of these attributes. Participants would be more critical if they perceived these elements to be missing.

When reviewing stimulus material, participants identified a minority of instances where they felt any of these attributes were missing. For example, if they felt a wider range of views should have been included; if they thought interviewees were not challenged enough or were challenged too aggressively; if they thought a report was one-sided; or if a report was perceived as only focusing on the negative.

*Ofcom, *Drivers of perceptions of due impartiality: The BBC and the wider news landscape*, 2022

Other genres played a more minor role than news in informing opinions on the topics, and impartiality was not seen as a core criterion outside news

Other genres could inform opinions and attitudes towards some of the topics but to a much lesser extent than news

Other genres had the potential to inform audience opinions on some of the topics areas included in the research at a more general level; for example, documentaries that focused on a specific subject like transport infrastructure or drama that conveyed what it was like in a busy hospital or prison. However, the research suggests that their overall impact is at a lower level than news.

Non-news genres had the potential to inform perceptions in different ways:

- Documentaries and long-form current affairs had the potential to make a valued contribution to understanding of the topics.
- Comedy and satire that focused on the news specifically could play a role in the audience engaging with and digesting recent news events and talking points.
- Some drama output could also contribute to forming, or confirming, an impression of a given area, such as the NHS or prisons, as long as it felt authentic and credible.
- Soap operas were well known for raising awareness of different issues, whether health-related or social.

However, beyond documentaries, participants' motives for engaging with other genres were very different from the need to be informed. With genres such as drama, comedy and soaps, emotional resonance, entertainment and familiarity were the main audience needs, and drivers of engagement accordingly.

Impartiality was not seen as a core criterion for non-news genres

Impartiality was seen by participants as a core criterion of quality in the context of news, and was universally recognised as a requirement. And, in the main, the BBC's reputation for impartiality was driven by news content, and in particular political coverage.

Although some level of accuracy was seen as important when portraying a serious topic (including in dramas and soaps), as a genre only factual documentaries, outside news, had higher audience expectations in terms of presenting a rigorous account based on the evidence and, if relevant to the programme, reflecting different arguments and viewpoints surrounding the topic.

Impartiality, as commonly defined by participants, was not seen as appropriate for other genres, in particular for drama. Any questions of bias or a perceived lack of balance had to be fairly overt to even register, and even then could be seen as a legitimate part of the creative vision or authorial message of an output.

The concept of 'due impartiality' was felt to have some relevance to non-news genres at an overall output level, across the BBC's portfolio of programming, rather than at a specific series or individual programme level. The elements of due impartiality that were seen as potentially relevant in this way were in reference to including a diversity of views and voices across overall output, and this was also seen as consistent with preserving the individual licence of writers and performers at a programme level.

In conclusion

The research highlighted the central role that direct experience and personal background played in shaping participants' beliefs and attitudes towards tax, public spending, and government borrowing and debt. In terms of the media, whilst other genres could play a role in feeding into impressions of a given topic, the research underlined the importance of the news as by far the most influential media genre in informing public opinion on these topics. Impartiality, as it was commonly defined by participants, was universally seen as a central criterion for news, whilst it was generally not seen as relevant or applicable to other genres such as drama, soaps, comedy and documentaries (though for factual content, there was a higher expectation of rigour and robust evidence).

The research revealed the extent to which the challenges of engagement and comprehension were as pertinent as perceptions of impartiality in news reporting of these specific topics. Participants typically felt distant and detached from topics that they felt powerless to influence, struggled to relate to, and often found prohibitively complex to understand. Engagement and comprehension were therefore important barriers that also needed to be taken into consideration when reporting these topics.

Comprehension was a particularly significant challenge for participants. The complex nature of the topics meant that the majority could struggle to understand fully reports that contained macro financial, economic and fiscal analysis. Furthermore, many participants expressed a reluctance to invest the time and effort in understanding topics that were perceived to be too complex or that could be hard to relate to their own lives. The engagement and comprehension challenges often went hand-in-hand, as low engagement undermined the potential to understand, whilst the comprehension barriers could justify disengagement for some.

However, the research also revealed that participants found reporting more engaging when they could connect the story with their own day-to-day lives, and this was often done best when the reporting included relatable human stories, for example, that helped encapsulate the wider issues being reported.

Despite the significant comprehension challenges, participants still had questions that they wanted the news to investigate, and there was some appetite for news output that was specifically designed to explain and educate audiences about the topics in scope. However, the research also indicated that engagement barriers meant that audiences would not necessarily seek out such explanatory output, and it would need to be included more within the news content that they currently consume.

Perceptions of impartiality were not only shaped by reactions to the way a story was reported at an editorial level, but also by pre-conceptions of the news source, as well as participants' own feelings and attitudes towards the story being reported. In light of the engagement and comprehension challenges presented by these topics, participants did not tend to have particularly strong feelings or views about the topics in scope at the time of the research, and were more likely to defer to the authority of the news source. However, participants in Scotland demonstrated heightened sensitivity to the topics, as they mapped them more closely to the political landscape in Scotland.

Overall, engagement and especially comprehension challenges affected the extent to which participants were able to assess impartiality. Given these challenges, when evaluating news output on these topics, participants often relied upon surface criteria and a core set of attributes that they associated with impartiality: including a range of views; questioning and challenging views; covering different sides; and perceptions of overall balance.

Participants did not raise significant issues regarding the perceived impartiality of BBC coverage of the specific topics in scope, but there were a minority of instances where participants suggested some of the above attributes were felt to be missing from individual pieces of reporting. Despite a range of often contrasting political biases that could be projected onto the BBC by participants, usually shaped by their own political leanings, overall, participants generally did not discern the BBC as having a particular point of view on the topics in scope, and explicit accusations of political bias in the reporting tested were relatively rare across the research. Overall, the research did not identify particular concerns from participants with perceived impartiality in BBC output on these topics.

In their own words



Engagement

I'm doing what I'm doing in my life, I know that there are lots of political policies that affect me in some capacity. But I kind of feel like there's not much I can do about it. I try not to think about it.

(Male, 35-44, C1C2, East Sussex, Lower*)

To a lesser extent I'm interested in national debt and borrowing, but that's only because I don't know much about it and it's hard to understand. I don't know how it actually works and what the impact and implications are.

(Male, 55-75, C2D, Glasgow, Lower)

[The penal system] *doesn't really cross my mind, it's a bit out of sight and out of mind and happy to be out of mind.*

Our attention has been taken over by Covid. And now, by the cost of living crisis, that is what people are worried about...

(Female, 35-44, BC1, Enniskillen, Lower)

Especially at the moment - and now that we've got a little one - I'm more and more aware of things that are going to hit me in the pocket... and what impact that will have on my family.

(Female, 35-44, ABC1, Fife/Stirling, Medium)



Comprehension

To be honest, most of it is right over my head. It's not really something I think about very often.

(Male, 35-44, C1C2, East Sussex, Lower)

I would love to see a basic economic lesson, giving a simple straightforward explanation of the terms politicians use when discussing UK taxes... It should be easier to understand for your average person on the street.

(Female, 35-44, BC1, Enniskillen, Lower)

The specialists can tend to overcomplicate their responses and lose the viewer as a consequence. Even the best specialists sometimes forget or overestimate our ability to understand all the jargon and technicalities.

(Male, 55-75, C2D, Glasgow, Lower)

The panel [in a report shown] used many facts and statistics, which went over my head a bit as member of the audience.

(Male, 25-34, BC1, London, Higher)

The scale of national debt and borrowing is almost kind of unimaginable to those of us that are not experts in the field. So we kind of have to accept what we're told, pretty much by the media as to, you know, national borrowing is increasing, national borrowing is decreasing. But realistically, it doesn't actually mean anything tangible to us... For the man in the street, it's kind of like 'Is that something we need to worry about, personally?'

(Male, 55-75, BC1, West Devon, Higher)



Impartiality

[Impartiality means] *Both sides of the story. Balanced and you hear both sides and hear them equally, making sure you see both sides of the story.*

(Female, 35-54, BC1, Gillingham, Medium)

[Impartiality means] *Reporting the news without any political spin... or agenda or monetary agenda.*

(Male, 35-44, C2DE, Dumfries, Medium)

I do think the BBC does its best. I mean, they have real professional journalists, real professional presenters, that don't chip in their own opinion.

(Male, 18-24, C2DE, Belfast, Higher)

My view is [the BBC] try to be as neutral as possible, so from a reporting point of view, it is important that they are not peddling a view and they are trying to get both sides of the argument across.

(Male, 55-70, C2DE, East Anglia, Higher)

There is a general feeling on some of the politically led stories about government policy... There are two sides to every story and I am not sure whether, with the BBC, that we get all sides of the story and all the information.

(Female, 35-44, ABC1, East Anglia, Medium)

I could see that the reporter only covered a small area to obtain the story and interviewed people who were shopping near to the high street in Middlesbrough and not in any other areas. The town centre is fairly run down...

(Female, 55-75, C2D, Stockton, Medium)



Background and methodology

This research sought to explore UK audiences' perceptions of fairness and impartiality in BBC output covering taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt

The BBC's impartiality action plan, announced in October 2021, includes BBC Board-commissioned thematic reviews of output in key areas of public debate. These reviews are designed to assess whether the BBC is meeting the required standards of impartiality and accuracy across BBC UK content including the devolved Nations.

The first review focuses on BBC's output relating to taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt, covering the BBC's UK public service radio, television and online content.

This audience research was commissioned as part of the inputs to this first review.

The objective of the research was to explore if and how UK audiences perceive BBC output to achieve fairness and impartiality in its output relating to taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt

The specific topics in scope included:

- Taxation – specifically income tax and VAT
- Public spending in three areas – Health, Transport and the Penal System
- Government borrowing and debt.

A two-stage qualitative approach was commissioned to deliver the research objective. A qualitative methodology was chosen as the most effective means to explore the research objective and questions in the depth needed.

The research was conducted over July-October 2022.

A total of 127 people took part in the research from 24 locations across the UK, through 37 depth interviews and 16 focus groups.

Participants were recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population. To this end, the sample included a spread of ages, socio-economic groups, ethnicity, and gender, as well as a range of political leanings that were reflective of each location. As far as possible, the research included different kinds of location per nation. The sample also included participants with different levels of self-defined interest in and knowledge of the topics under consideration.

The research explored audience perceptions across a range of genres including news output, and also drama, comedy, soap operas/continuing dramas, and factual output.

As part of the research, 133 pieces of BBC content across news and other genres were explored with participants. These were mainly from October 2021 to March 2022, the period for content identified at the start of the thematic review.

The qualitative audience research that informed the thematic review was conducted in two stages.

A programme of qualitative research explored the objectives in two stages

In light of the exploratory and complex nature of the research objective and questions, a qualitative approach was adopted that would enable the study to explore in depth audience attitudes and reactions to the topics in scope and their representation in the media, including eliciting detailed and nuanced reactions to a range of BBC output on the subject matter.

A two-stage approach was designed.

Stage 1 was an exploratory phase, which needed to ascertain what participants' natural, spontaneous starting point was on the topics under review. Individual depth interviews were chosen to ensure rich, one-to-one discussions and provide the necessary level of contextualisation of audience attitudes and responses.

Stage 2 required a comprehensive review of relevant BBC output to test reactions to content across a larger qualitative sample. Stage 2 therefore involved 16 online focus groups with 5-6 participants per group. Group discussions were the most effective means of accessing a relatively large-scale qualitative sample and exploring perceptions in a more discursive context. Stage 2 also involved 12 depth interviews with Gaelic and Welsh speakers in order to explore reactions to BBC output in those languages.

**STAGE 1: EXPLORATORY DEPTH
INTERVIEWS WITH 25 PARTICIPANTS**
25 x online individual depth interviews



**STAGE 2: ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS/DEPTHS
WITH 102 PARTICIPANTS**
*16 x online focus groups and 12 x online individual
depth interviews (Welsh and Gaelic speakers)*



This report conveys the qualitative findings across the research.

The two stages of the research were designed to address the following questions

Stage 1

To explore what audiences think about in relation to tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt and its coverage in the media

- What is in audiences' minds when it comes to tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt? (Including in terms of genre/content/stories/brand?)
- How do audiences find out about tax, spending, debt and borrowing issues?
- What do they associate with this in terms of BBC content/services specifically?
- What are the qualities/expectations that audiences look for in different content, genres, stories, brands on this topic?
- What indicators do audiences look to employ to judge impartiality?
- To what extent, if at all, do these differ by genre/content/story/presenter/contributor?
- How well, if at all, do audiences feel they understand these subjects?
- To what extent is there a link between comprehension and perceived impartiality (and an ability to judge impartiality)?
- How well does the BBC do compared with other providers?
- To what extent, if any, do audiences think the BBC has a position on issues of tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt?
- Does this perception differ depending on genre/content/story/presenter/contributor?
- In news specifically, do audiences notice who or what may instigate a news story?
- What, if any, messages do audiences take from BBC coverage of tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt? How does this differ by: genre/content/story?

Stage 2

To test specific content with audiences to explore their response to specific treatments, in terms of signifiers of fairness, impartiality and bias, and how, if at all, these differ by content type/genre

- What are the signifiers of fairness, impartiality and bias to audiences?
- What are the quality criteria that audiences expect across genre/content/story?
- To what extent, if at all, do audiences comprehend tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt content?
- How far does output provide sufficient context to achieve clarity and understanding?
- Do audiences feel content about these topics provides a good spread of opinion?
- Do audiences feel the content is for them?
- Do audiences feel the content to be impartial?
- What are audience perceptions of presenters, editors, reporters, guests, and interviewees in terms of:
 - Perceptions of impartiality
 - The perceived state of knowledge
 - The tone and approach to any interviews
 - Are contributors perceived to have the opportunity to explain their thinking as well as their views on others' perspectives?
 - Range / type of contributors
- To what extent does language affect perceptions of impartiality?

Stage 1

Overview and rationale

Stage 1 was exploratory in nature and aimed to ascertain what participants' natural starting point was on the topics in scope, and explore the extent to which they engaged in the different topics, how they thought about them generally, and also establish what was feeding into their views. This exploration included gauging the role of the wider media in informing participants' perspectives, both at a general level and in relation to specific genres.

In light of this, individual depth interviews were the most effective approach for enabling the required contextualised exploration of attitudes and responses.

Stage 1 therefore engaged 25 participants in one-to-one 1.5 hour interviews conducted over Zoom, exploring attitudes and perceptions in greater detail, uninfluenced by group dynamics. All of the depth interviews explored the role of the media and different genres in relation to the topics in scope. Because of the topics in scope, there was a possibility that participants would focus most on the news genre when considering genres about the topics. Therefore, five of the interviews focused in greater detail on the role of non-news genres to build a deeper understanding of the extent to which other genres may be playing a role in informing views on the specific topics.

Online pre-tasking for all participants

Before their interview, participants engaged in an online pre-task over two days. On day one, the pre-task explored their general engagement with TV and radio. On day two, with most participants, the pre-task explored their interest and engagement with any areas of public and government policy. For the five participants focusing on the role of non-news genres, the pre-task on day two explored their interest and engagement with dramas and soaps.

The pre-task was designed to be open ended and exploratory in order to allow participants to elaborate their own spontaneous preferences and interests without being prompted to consider the specific topics in scope. This enabled the research to generate a more authentic sense of where participants naturally focused their attention, and their potential interests in different areas of public policy. For the participants who were not focused on non-news genres, the pre-task was also designed so as not to prompt them to consider any specific media genres before the interviews.

The pre-tasks were then analysed by the research moderators before the interview took place and used as a starting point for discussion and further probing.

Online individual depth interviews

The depth interviews built on responses to the pre-task to explore further attitudes towards, and engagement with, the topics in scope, and placing them in the wider context of participants' own spontaneous areas of interest. The interview explored individual's engagement with and understanding of the different topic areas, including awareness and understanding of different views and perspectives. It then explored how people formed their views on the different topics, including the role the media and different media genres potentially played in this. Their expectations of/criteria for different genres were probed. Discussions then explored how participants felt about the way the news media in general covered the topics, their criteria for news coverage of the topics, sources they feel do it well and then perceptions of BBC News. The final stages of the interview explored reactions to specific BBC news reporting used as stimulus material.

The non-news depths had a stronger focus on exploring the extent to which non-news content/other genres played a role in informing participants' views on the topics and the discussion started with this exploration. The news genre was also discussed in these interviews, but this was done towards the end of the interview to avoid prompting participants to think of news before other genres had been fully explored.

Stage 1 findings shaped the approach taken in Stage 2. Stage 1 indicated the relative significance of the news as the most influential genre in shaping participants' views and understanding of the topics in scope. In light of this, the overall approach in Stage 2 was weighted towards the news genre more than other genres.

Stage 2

Overview and rationale

Following the contextual exploration of perceptions and attitudes in Stage 1, Stage 2 required a deeper review of a range of BBC output on the topics in scope, testing reactions to news and non-news content across a larger qualitative sample. Stage 2 therefore convened 16 online focus groups each with 5-6 participants per group. Group discussions were the most effective means of accessing a relatively large-scale qualitative sample and exploring perceptions in a more discursive context.

A total of 90 new participants were engaged in a pre-task followed by two-hour discussions that enabled the research to build a richer, broader, and more reflective picture of attitudes towards the topics in scope, and explore in detail perceptions of related news reporting and content from other genres.

Stage 1 had revealed the much greater significance of news in informing participants' views on the topics in scope relative to other genres. As such, 12 of the 16 focus groups explored the news and factual genres in Stage 2, whilst four focus groups concentrated on other genres.

As part of Stage 2, half of the focus groups were introduced to a definition of due impartiality based on the BBC's editorial guidelines and were asked to consider this when reviewing content during the discussion. The other half were not introduced to this and instead explored reactions to content using their own definitions of impartiality. Splitting the sample in this way allowed the research to explore reactions to content based on the definition of the editorial guidelines, as well as reactions based on participants' own natural starting point.

Online pre-tasking for all participants

The Stage 2 pre-task took place over 2-3 days.

On day one, all participants were asked to consume and comment on a full episode of long-form content. For the news focus groups, this was an episode of factual content. For the non-news focus groups, this was 1-2 episodes taken from drama, soap operas and comedy genres. All participants were asked to comment on the output in terms of highlighting anything they liked or disliked about the programme, anything they felt they learned or discovered, and anything that surprised or irritated them. The questions were deliberately kept open ended to avoid prompting participants in any way and leaving it up to them to make the comments that they felt were most relevant.

On day two, participants for non-news groups were asked to watch a further 1-2 episodes of drama, soap opera and/or comedy output and respond to the same set of questions. For the news focus groups, participants were asked to consume and comment on 6-8 BBC news reports on the topics in scope across online, audio and TV over days two and three. They were asked a similar series of questions eliciting their views about the way the news story was reported and presented. The questions were designed to ensure that participants concentrated on the way the story was reported, so that they did not unduly focus on their views of the story itself rather than the way it was covered.

Across all pre-tasks, participants were not prompted to consider impartiality at any stage in order to understand if and where impartiality or bias were raised spontaneously.

Online focus groups

A primary focus for Stage 2 was on testing reactions to actual BBC output on the topics in scope, grounding overall perceptions and attitudes in the content itself.

In news groups, participants discussed their engagement with and attitudes towards the topics in scope, and what was informing their views, including the role of the media in this. They then explored how participants defined good quality news on these topics, perceptions of BBC News, and definitions of impartiality, before evaluating news clips shared in the group discussion. Definitions of impartiality were explored prior to content being shown so that participants could review the content with this in mind.

Non-news groups explored engagement with, perceptions of and perceived quality criteria of different media genres, particularly drama, soaps and comedy. Groups discussed reactions to the pre-task stimulus, before reviewing related clips, as well as drama, soap or comedy clips. The concept of impartiality and definitions were also discussed in relation to non-news genres and the specific content reviewed.

Gaelic and Welsh speaking interviews

An additional 12 individual depth interviews were undertaken to explore the research objectives across BBC output in Gaelic and Welsh. The interviews were conducted in Welsh and Gaelic by specialist moderators, with simultaneous translation to enable the Jigsaw team to listen in. As with the focus groups, all participants took part in an online pre-task, eliciting their reactions to a range of news reports in the relevant language, with fresh stimulus material being shared with them during the interview.

The sample for the research was designed to be reflective of the UK adult population

Sampling approach and design principles

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

- An even split of gender
- Age range from 18-75 years old
- A spread of socio-economic groups
- A range of political leanings reflective of each Nation, based on:
 - In England and Wales, in Stage 1, voting behaviour in the 2016 EU Referendum, and in Stage 2, voting behaviour in the 2019 UK General Election
 - In Scotland, the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland
 - In Northern Ireland, identification as unionist or nationalist
- Representation of ethnic minority participants within the overall sample.

An additional and important sample design consideration was recruiting participants based around knowledge and interest levels in the topics in scope, owing to the impact different levels could have on discussions and perceptions of the topics and BBC output. Across both stages, participants were asked to self define their knowledge and interest levels for the topics in scope. At the recruitment stage, the specific research topics were subsumed within a longer list so as not to reveal the focus of the research.

Additional criteria included:

- News-focused groups consumed news at least 5 days per week; Groups focused on other genres consumed news at least 3 days per week
- A range of interests in terms of news genres and topics
- A mix of platforms used for news including broadcast, online and print
- A range of brands used for news across broadcast, online and print, both national and local
- A range of relationships with BBC News in terms of heavy, medium and light usage
- Participants in both Stage 1 and 2 who were focused on other genres had viewed some of the drama, soap and comedy programmes of interest to the research.

A key principle in structuring the sample in Stage 2 was ensuring that each focus group was cohesive. Groups were structured around participants' self-defined knowledge and interest levels in tax, public spending, government borrowing and debt. Within this, groups were then organised around age group, social grade and political leanings, in order to ensure participants felt relatively comfortable and able to participate in the group discussion. Please see the technical appendix for details of the structure of the groups.

Gaelic and Welsh speaking interviews

For the Gaelic and Welsh-speaking interviews, participants were recruited on the basis of being fluent in speaking and reading, and consuming news services in, the relevant language. Welsh speakers were drawn from a mix of locations across Wales. With Gaelic speakers, three participants were recruited from the Central Belt area, and the remaining three were recruited from the Western Isles and West Coast of Scotland.

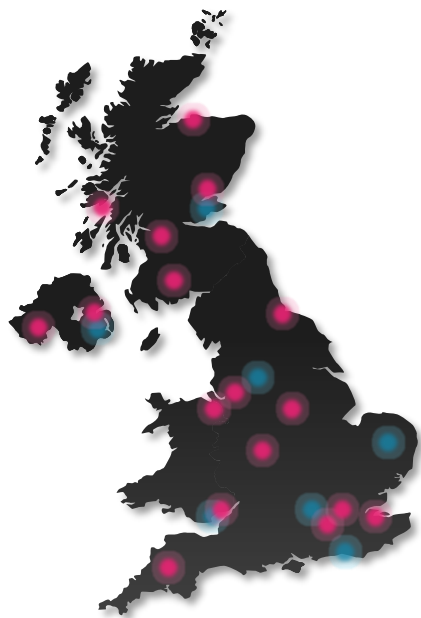
'Informed' and 'instinctive' sample cohorts in Stage 2

In Stage 2, an approach was designed to allow the research to explore reactions to content based on the editorial guidelines that BBC output is bound by and reactions based on participants' own natural definitions of impartiality. As such, half of the focus groups were 'informed' of the definition of due impartiality based on the BBC's editorial guidelines before viewing content during the group discussions. The remaining half of the focus groups were not introduced to the due impartiality definition and took an 'instinctive' approach to reviewing content.

What this meant in practice was that all participants were asked about their own interpretations of the term 'impartiality' in the early part of discussions. Then among the 'informed' cohort, the definition of due impartiality based on the BBC's editorial guidelines was shared and discussed before using it as a framework for evaluating stimulus material. With the remaining half of the groups, reactions to content were explored at a more instinctive level, using their own definitions of impartiality, as the natural starting point for audience reactions to content.

For the rest of this report, focus groups where the definition of due impartiality was shared are referenced as 'informed' and focus groups where the definition was not shared are referenced as 'instinctive'.

Research locations



Stage 1: 25 x Depth Interviews	
Nations	Locations
England x 13	East Anglia
Scotland x 6	West Sussex/Brighton
Wales x 3	Reading/Newbury
Northern Ireland x 3	Leeds/York
	Fife/Stirling
	Bridgend/Cardiff
	County Down

Stage 2: 12 x News and Factual Focus Groups	
Nations	Locations
England x 5	Stockton
Scotland x 3	West Devon
Wales x 2	Gillingham
Northern Ireland x 2	London
	Kingston
	Enniskillen
	Belfast
	Glasgow
	Dumfries
	Dundee
	Rhyl/Wrexham
	Newport

Stage 2: 4 x Other Genres Focus Groups	
Nations	Locations
England x 3	Warrington
Scotland x 1	Birmingham
	Nottinghamshire
	Elgin
Stage 2: 12 x Gaelic and Welsh-speaking Depth Interviews	
Scotland x 6	3 x Central Belt (Scot)
Wales x 6	3 x Western Isles (Scot)
	3 x North Wales
	3 x South Wales

The research locations were chosen to include a range of city, suburban, town, and also rural locations across all four nations.

Stimulus material: overview

Approach to stimulus

Across the research, 133 pieces of BBC content on the topics in scope across news and other genres were explored with participants.

In Stage 1, stimulus was used in a more instrumental way as a means of identifying emerging themes and issues to explore further in Stage 2

Stage 2 then systematically tested a much larger body of BBC output across a larger qualitative sample, in order to explore responses to a range of different BBC output and specific treatments, especially in terms of signifiers of impartiality and bias. Across the pre-task and group discussion, news-focused groups were shown clips from BBC news output across TV, audio and online, as well as a current affairs programme and news-related comedy clips. Groups focused on other genres were shown programmes and clips from dramas, soaps and comedies across TV/audio.

News stimulus for the audience research was selected from October 2021 – March 2022, the period of focus for the thematic review. Owing to the nature of the content and less frequent broadcasting of non-news content relating to the topics in scope, non-news stimulus for the audience research was selected from a wider broadcast window, covering summer 2021 to early summer 2022, in order to cover a range of the topics in scope.

News stimulus in Stage 1

- Stimulus material was shared with each participant in their one-to-one interview
- 4-6 news reports in each interview
- Stimulus material included audio and TV output
- Each item was shown between 2 and 3 times to enable comparisons
- 21 x TV, 9 x audio in total

News stimulus in Stage 2

- 6 x news reports shared with news groups via online pre-task
- Around 6 x news reports were played during focus groups
- Each item was tested with 2 groups on average across the sample
- 25 x online articles, 12 x audio, 43 x TV were used with the main news sample
- 9 x Gaelic and 13 x Welsh language items were used with Gaelic and Welsh speakers (7 x online, 8 x audio, 7 x TV)

Long-form stimulus in Stage 2

- 1 x long-form documentary / current affairs programme shared with participants for news groups and Gaelic depths in online pre-task
- 2-3 x long-form drama / comedy drama / soap episodes (2 hours total) shared with participants for 'other genre' groups in online pre-task
- Each item was tested with 2 groups on average across the sample (all Gaelic participants saw the same episode)
- 10 x TV (including 1 x Gaelic), 2 x audio

Stage 1 stimulus material was used in a more instrumental way as a means of identifying emerging themes and issues to explore further in Stage 2. Stage 2 systematically tested a much larger body of BBC output across a larger qualitative sample.

Stimulus material: a range of BBC output was tested with participants across the research

News stimulus

To reflect the range of BBC news output, 80 pieces of content were selected considering the following criteria:

- Diversity of subject matter – across the stimulus, all topics in scope were covered
- Range of platforms – stimulus covered TV, radio and online content
- Range of formats and styles – including TV and radio bulletins, specific programmes, different formats (magazine, documentary), online articles (of varying lengths – short pieces of under 250 words to medium-length and longer pieces (over 1,000 words)), styles (narrative pieces, explainers, interviews, panel discussions, correspondent analysis), range (across the broadcast day, broadcast week), content targeted at audiences overall and specific content
- Inclusion of an appropriate balance between content for specific fiscal events both UK and Nations (e.g. Budgets) and for day-to-day coverage of fiscal policy
- Inclusion of an appropriate balance of both Network and Nations content, especially as responsibility for some of the topics in scope is devolved
- Inclusion of a range of content that had previously raised questions over impartiality based on complaints/comments received by the BBC.

In order to test a large range of content, and test content within groups/interviews themselves, TV and radio clips were limited to around 2-5 minutes in length. Where full reports could therefore not be tested, clips were taken to reflect the main body of the piece (and in content tested as a result of complaints/comments received by the BBC would include the relevant parts), and bearing in mind comprehensibility and relevance to the topics in scope. Online articles were shown in full.

Gaelic/Welsh stimulus

In the Gaelic and Welsh depths, content was selected using the same considerations for the news content in English, reflecting output from across the range of Gaelic and Welsh news output on TV, radio and online. 13 pieces of Welsh content and 10 pieces of Gaelic content (including an extended report from *Eòrpa*) were tested.

Other genres stimulus

The Stage 2 News focus groups watched a full documentary / current affairs programme as part of their pre-task. Content was selected to cover a range of platforms (TV and radio), topics, and formats. Across the groups, the following programmes were explored:

- *Analysis: Can the UK ever be a low tax economy again?* (Radio 4)
- *Defending Digga D* (BBC Three)
- *Panorama: Surviving the Cost of Living Crisis* (BBC One)
- *The 15 Billion Pound Railway: Inside the Elizabeth Line* (E1) (BBC Two)
- *The Briefing Room: What's wrong with the NHS, and how do we fix it?* (Radio 4)
- *Debate Night* (BBC Scotland) – tested in two Scotland groups

The Stage 2 Other Genre focus groups watched two hours of long-form content as part of their pre-task. Content was selected to cover a mix of the topics in scope and a mix of formats, tones and styles. The following episodes were explored:

- *Doctors* (S23E27) (BBC One daytime drama set in a Midlands GP practice)
- *EastEnders* (23/03/22) (BBC One continuing drama – this episode included scenes set in a prison environment)
- *The Outlaws* (S1E1) (BBC One comedy drama centred on community service)
- *This is Going to Hurt* (S1E6) (BBC One comedy drama based on the Adam Kay book about his time working for the NHS)
- *Time* (S1E1) (BBC One drama set in a prison)

Clips of comedy shows *Have I Got News for You* (BBC One) and *The Now Show* (Radio 4) were identified relating to topics in scope and were also tested in Stage 2 across both news and non-news groups.



Main findings: The role of media in informing people's views on the topics

Participants' background and personal experiences were the most important factors in informing their views on the topics in scope

Personal background and direct experience were the most influential factors in informing participants' views on the topics under consideration

For many participants in the research, their own personal background and direct personal experiences were often the starting point, and ultimately what many relied upon when expressing a view or opinion on the topics in scope.

Personal background played an important role in informing a participant's outlook and views on the topics, and the stance they tended to adopt. This included the participant's upbringing and formative years, the area they were from, as well as where they currently lived, and also the views and values of those around them, whether family or friends. In addition, their own educational and working background also informed their views on the topics, whether in terms of helping them access the sometimes technical subject matter, or giving them a more personal insight into a particular area.

Direct experience was also a significant influence on participants' views. In the context of this research, the very direct and personal impact of income tax, and experiences of the health system as well as transport usage were the most frequently cited areas where participants felt they had some level of first-hand experiences to call upon when expressing their views. Beyond these areas, how participants felt about their own material and financial position also shaped their judgements and views about levels of public spending and taxation, whilst the quality of their local area could be another indicator of the state and impact of public spending in general.

Direct experiences gave participants a greater sense of confidence in their own opinion of a topic, and a greater propensity to express a view on it. Their intuitive feel for the subject matter was often a yardstick against which they would evaluate other information and inputs, including the news, often reacting positively or negatively towards information depending upon whether it confirmed or contradicted their views.

“

The media feed into certain extent, but personal perspective – I have seen it with my own eyes what it is like in a hospital – so it is more credible for me. It's things you see and hear whilst you are in a hospital or standing on a platform when there is a strike.
(Female, 35-44, ABC1, East Anglia, Medium*)

My job in the third sector meant I had to get to grips with the workings of some of these topics, what makes people poor, how can you help the disadvantaged.
(Male, 50-75, C1, South Wales, Higher, Welsh speaker)

Transport is really important, and also infrastructure in general in the Highlands. I now live in Glasgow but I know that as a topic it has such an impact on communities where Gaelic is spoken so it is also important to me.
(Male, 30-50, C1, Glasgow, Higher, Gaelic speaker)

The participants' own experiences and what they were hearing from others were central in shaping how they viewed many of the topics in scope. This was particularly the case with topics where they were more likely to be able to call upon direct experience, such as the health system or the transport they used.

Beyond direct personal experiences, the media was also as an important input into public perceptions of these topics, with news being the most influential genre

The news genre was the most significant and influential media genre

The media was also an important input into participants' views and impressions of the topics in consideration. When exploring awareness of where these topics were covered in the media, news emerged as the most important and influential genre in informing views, and the news was consistently cited as by far the most significant genre in terms of contributing to participants' awareness and understanding of the topics in scope.

When explicitly asked which media genre was feeding into participants' views, virtually all participants highlighted the news media. The news was the genre that they would rely upon to cover these types of topics, keeping them up to date with any developments, alerting them to any changes, and providing some form of analysis and insight. The news was consciously being used by participants to help shape their own opinion accordingly, and there was very little mention of any other genres in comparison.

Whilst the news was the most influential media genre, it is important also to reference the role that social media was playing in exposing participants to content that potentially touched upon these topics. Social media was frequently cited as an influential source of information. This would be a variety of content, but often included news content, whether articles that were being shared, or news sources and sometimes reporters that the participant was following via different platforms.

Impartiality was seen as a vital and essential ingredient in news, and impartiality was integral to the participants' notions of good quality news reporting.

Other genres played a more minor role in informing participants' views

Whilst there was very little spontaneous reference or conscious recall of other media genres contributing to participants' perceptions of these specific topics, the research did reveal that genres such as drama, comedy and soap operas could inform participants' views at a more general level and to a more minor extent than the news.

For some participants, comedy output that had a news focus could play a role in helping them process and understand the news, highlighting key events, and making it lighter and less 'depressing' and thereby easier to absorb. This was more at a general level and in relation to political events and happenings rather than the specific topics in scope for this research. Factual documentaries were valued for in depth insights, and placing a topic in its wider context, but their influence very much depended upon whether the audience chose to engage with particular programming. Soap operas were well known for raising awareness of a range of issues, typically personal health and social related. The influence of drama was less consciously recalled, but the research did reveal that a 'serious' drama in particular could play a role in shaping participants' broad understanding and impressions of a topic, particularly one where a participant had little direct experience to go on, such as in relation to the prison system.

Whilst other genres could play a more minor role in informing impressions of some of the topic areas, participants did not feel that impartiality was a relevant criterion, particularly for drama, comedy and soaps. Although some level of accuracy was seen as important when portraying a serious topic, only factual documentaries had higher audience expectations in terms of presenting a rigorous account based on the evidence and, if relevant to the programme, reflecting different arguments and viewpoints surrounding the topic.

Out of media, news was seen as the most significant area in informing people's views on the topics, with other genres having less impact. Impartiality was seen as a core criterion for news, but not as relevant for other genres. The findings in this report are therefore split into two – focusing first on news, then on other genres.

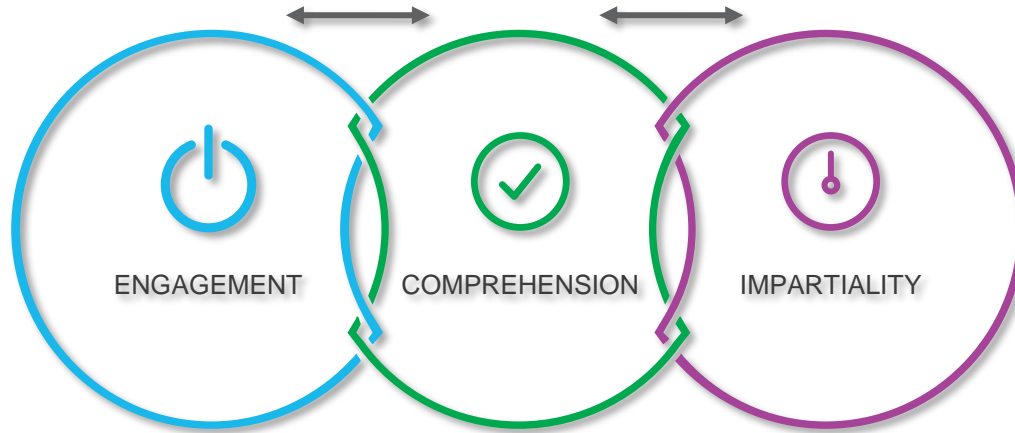


Main findings: News

Attitudes to the topics in scope, and their news reporting, were shaped at three main levels

The research revealed the importance of engagement and comprehension in shaping attitudes towards the specific topics in scope and this also influenced reactions to the reporting used as stimulus material in the research in terms of impartiality.

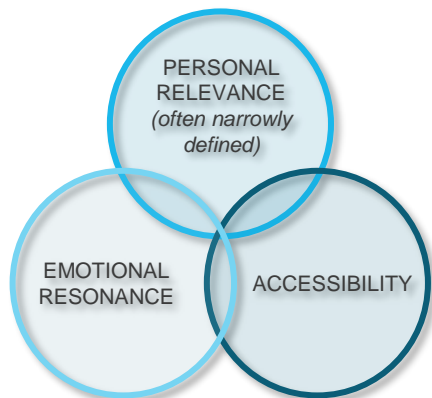
Engagement, comprehension and perceptions of impartiality are inter-related: low engagement meant low comprehension; low comprehension also meant low engagement (and, for some, active disengagement); low engagement and comprehension hindered participants' ability to assess impartiality.



The complex nature of the topics meant that engagement and comprehension often presented the main challenges for the bulk of the participants. Engagement and comprehension were often prerequisites to judging impartiality. Each of these areas is analysed in turn.

4.1 Engagement

Engagement with the topics was driven by three main factors: personal relevance in particular, and also emotional resonance and accessibility



PERSONAL RELEVANCE

In terms of engagement with the topics in scope, personal relevance was often the primary driver of audience attention, and this was often defined by participants in quite pragmatic terms. Participants generally claimed that they would tend to pay attention to these topic areas when there was some significant change that they felt had the potential to impact them in a material or direct way.

Tax... impacts me the most directly and is the one I read about the most.
(Male, 25-34, BC1, Dundee, Lower*)

EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

Emotional resonance, and whether a topic area activated strong feelings amongst the sample, was also a driver of engagement. Of all the topic areas, public spending in health strongly stood out as the most emotionally salient for participants. The NHS was often spontaneously highlighted by participants as one of the most important public services, and as a consequence it was an area of public spending that participants would often pay relatively closer attention to, compared with other areas.

The health service – that worries me to death.
(Female, 55-75, C2D, Stockton, Medium)

ACCESSIBILITY

A third driver of engagement with the topics in scope was accessibility, and the degree to which participants felt able to understand the topics enough to make engagement worthwhile. The financial and fiscal nature of the topics in scope meant that many found the subject matter particularly challenging from a comprehension point of view, and this acted as a significant barrier to engagement in many cases.

When you hear the figures of what the government is actually borrowing in the billions, you can't fathom that in real terms.
(Female, 45-54, ABC1, Kingston, Higher)

The NHS was the most emotionally salient area, but the comprehension challenges entailed in the fiscal and financial aspects of the topics often acted as a barrier to engagement across the sample.

Engagement varied across the different topic areas. The penal system and government borrowing and debt were often the most distant and removed from participants' lives



Taxation and VAT

Income tax was a very visible and tangible form of personal taxation for most, and participants' main need was to know whether there would be any changes to what they paid. It was this largely pragmatic and material need that drove attention more than any other factor.

VAT was relatively less salient and more invisible to participants. A minority of participants did spontaneously claim to pay attention to VAT at a general level. Some were conscious of the impact on prices and costs, and expressed an interest in understanding the relative proportion that VAT represented in the overall tax system, and whether it was levied on the 'right' goods and services. However, this level of engagement was relatively exceptional, and on prompting most felt that the general lack of visibility of VAT, and the fact that it is subsumed into the price across such a wide array of goods and services, meant it was a less top-of-mind tax for the majority of the sample.

In contrast to VAT, other areas of taxation could be more top-of-mind and emotionally activating for participants, in particular fuel duty. This area of taxation was a much stronger focus for many participants, as it played into wider concerns about the rising cost of living during the fieldwork.

Public spending – health, transport, penal system

Public spending in **health** stood out as the most engaging topic for many participants owing to the societal and personal value attributed to the NHS. Most participants had direct experiences of the service, and many knew people who worked in the NHS. This general reliance and emotional salience meant that funding of the NHS was more at the forefront of participants' minds.

Transport tended to engage as a topic when it affected a participant's own journey. Consequently, many spontaneously talked about issues such as travel and fuel costs, and disruptions caused by the rail strikes taking place during the fieldwork. Occasionally, transport connectivity issues were referred to by some in more rural areas, and there was some interest in large-scale, long-term infrastructure projects such as HS2 from sample groups that may be affected by the service, but even then interest was often limited. Among Gaelic speaking participants, especially in the Western Isles, transport was a particularly salient topic.

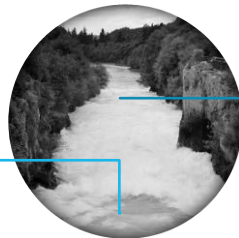
The **penal system** and penal funding was the least engaging of the three areas. Many participants felt they had little direct experience to call upon, and readily admitted that they rarely thought about both the system and its funding.

Government borrowing and debt

Discussing government borrowing and debt did reveal some generalised anxiety, in particular about how much borrowing and spending there had been in light of Covid. Concerns about whether the UK had too much national debt (often compared to wartime levels by participants) could generate engagement, as could concerns about the perceived wasting of public money or perceived unfairness about where money goes, but these were relatively latent at the time of the research.

However, beyond these generalised concerns, the area of government borrowing and debt could be the least engaging topic for many participants. The barriers to engagement stemmed from both the complexity and relatability of the topic. Of all the areas discussed in the research, government borrowing and debt was often the most technical and difficult area for participants to understand. Many felt the subject matter was intrinsically complex and required specialist expertise and considerable effort to access. In addition, the topic was hard for participants to relate to, and connect with, their own lives. Overall, at the time of the research, the topic felt relatively abstract and distant, particularly when compared with areas like income tax, the NHS, and sometimes transport, which participants felt had a more direct and personal impact on their lives.

There were a number of barriers to engaging with the fiscal and financial aspects of the topic areas in particular



'Downstream' concerns dominated attention

It became apparent through discussions with participants that their 'downstream' day-to-day and lived experiences tended to dominate their attention. The very tangible concerns and growing anxiety about cost of living issues, and how participants experienced the public services they used, were more front-of-mind than the 'upstream' fiscal and financial aspects of the topics in scope.

Whilst participants could sometimes express a concern about funding, spending or borrowing levels, these were often at a very general level. In the main, at the time of the research, many participants struggled to connect what could be described as 'upstream' macro fiscal policies, with their own 'downstream' personal experiences. Understandably, many participants were focused on their own day-to-day lives, experiences and concerns, and the research had prompted participants to engage with the fiscal and financial aspects of the topic areas more than they normally would.

When it came to the news reporting used as stimulus material in the research, much of the material did not necessarily bridge the gap between macro policies and participants' lived experiences. However, when it did succeed in making this connection, participants commended the reporting accordingly.

Complexity and feelings of powerlessness acted as barriers

The complexity of the subject matter itself was a general barrier to engagement.

For participants with self-defined low and medium levels of understanding, and also some with self-defined high levels of understanding, the intrinsically complex nature of fiscal and economic information could be relatively inaccessible and inhibit engagement accordingly. This was compounded as participants were most often engaging only sporadically with the subject matter.

An additional barrier to engagement was that many felt there was little that they could do about these topics. Consequently, a common attitude adopted by many participants was one of pragmatic resignation and detachment about areas that they felt they were unable to influence in any way.

For many participants, it was a perfectly rational response to avoid investing time and effort in understanding topics that were often highly complex, and that they felt powerless to influence. This attitude of pragmatic resignation again reinforced the tendency to pay most attention when they could see that these topics were personally relevant and going to impact their lives in some way directly. It is important to note that this attitude of pragmatic resignation is dynamic rather than static, and that attitudes have the potential to change in a different context, such as during an election, when audiences may feel that they do have more of an opportunity to influence the topics by exercising their vote.

Overall, despite the engagement challenges, underlying emotions around the use of 'public money' could activate interest, for example feelings of perceived unfairness about where funds are invested or anxieties about levels of borrowing. However, overall many participants reported avoiding investing too much effort in understanding topics that were often highly complex, and that they felt powerless to influence.

Responses to reporting examples used as stimulus material in the research revealed three sources of engagement at an editorial level



Personal relevance

As already outlined, a key driver of engagement in the topics in scope was personal relevance, and this extended to reactions to the reporting used as stimulus material in the research.

Whilst personal relevance was often defined by participants in relatively pragmatic terms i.e. understanding what the news practically 'means for me', it could also include illustrating how the issue being reported affected another individual, through a personal case study or a societal group that the participant could relate to and identify with.

For both Gaelic and Welsh speaking participants too, they felt closer to news coverage in the relevant language, in part because of the language used, but also because the news agenda and stories covered by these services were perceived to be more relevant to their sense of community and identity.



Relatable human stories

Human stories were an important source of engagement at an editorial level. Narrating how a given issue was affecting an individual helped participants connect with the wider topic, and made it more relatable. Individual case studies could make a relatively dry and unengaging topic more emotionally involving, through being able to see and hear how the issue was being personally experienced, particularly when this was conveyed in an empathetic and sometimes poignant way.

In addition, human stories could aid understanding by bringing complex subject matter down to a more personal level. This was particularly the case with reports that enabled the audience to hear directly from people affected by an issue, and when they felt they had been given sufficient time to tell their story.



Additional reporting elements

There were other elements of reporting that also played a role in engagement.

Headlines played an important role in an online context for engagement, and many participants were very aware that they used headlines to judge whether they wanted to engage with a story in more depth, as well as getting the gist of the news itself.

Informal and colloquial language could help engagement as it could make a report feel more relatable and accessible to participants.

Stylistic devices (often targeted at youth audiences), such as music and sound, editorial effects, and certain delivery styles, could also drive engagement by conveying the news in a lighter or more punchy way, making the news output feel less dry to participants and easier to process.

Highlighting personal relevance and using relatable human stories had the potential to connect 'upstream' macro issues with 'downstream' lived experiences, thereby making the news output more engaging for participants. Relatable personal stories also helped humanise what could be quite dry and technical subjects.

However, too much perceived emphasis on some engagement techniques could create a tension with other quality criteria that are also important to audiences



Human stories that placed too much emphasis on subjective experience

If a report was deemed to devote too much time and space to relatable human stories, it could be accused of placing too much emphasis on subjective experience. For some participants, this could be seen as lacking the wider context or bigger picture. In such instances, participants could be unsure what overall conclusions they should be drawing from individual case studies alone, and could feel that a report focusing too heavily on individual stories lacked a more objective overview.

Framing human stories within the bigger picture was important, and helped participants both engage with the topics at a broader macro level, and also convey a greater sense of objectivity and impartiality in the overall report.



Headlines that raised issues vis-a-vis accuracy and appropriateness

Headlines in a minority of instances in the stimulus reviewed raised some questions from participants in terms of accuracy and appropriateness. Whilst not a significant issue across the online articles tested in the research, some headlines had the potential for the participant to feel it did not reflect the detail in the article, or for the headline to be perceived as alarmist or sensationalist in some way. However, in some of these instances, reactions stemmed from a participant's own emotions about the story, and feeling uncomfortable or anxious when confronted with the issue or state of affairs that the headline was attempting to convey.

Therefore, mixed in with participants' comments about the headlines, were their own emotional reactions to the story. Getting every headline right in a way that didn't generate any emotional reaction could therefore be challenging, particularly when trying to convey the gravity of a situation or issue.



Communication styles could undermine credibility

The use of informal and colloquial language could sometimes be criticised by participants. It could be perceived as lacking credibility or sufficient gravitas, or even construed as bias.

Informal and more personal communication styles, in editorial pieces online, for example, could come across as being too opinionated, which for some participants undermined perceptions of impartiality.

Reactions to other stylistic devices could be mixed, and differences of opinion on their merit were also evident. Some participants felt they helped engagement but occasionally others could find devices such as music and delivery styles intended to make a report more punchy, lighter, or youth-orientated, distracting, or making what was already a complex topic even harder to follow.

It is important to note that some of the reports designed to engage younger audiences did perform well among the intended target audience, but could jar for older participants who were not the target audience.

Engagement techniques need to be balanced with other criteria that are also important to participants and that play an important role in maintaining perceptions of quality, accuracy and impartiality.

4.2 Comprehension

How the participants and a news source saw the world could be different – particularly with the content tested in this research, which was focused on fiscal policy



Audience perspective can be more

- Emotional*
- Construed*
- Intuitive*
- Bottom up*
- Subjective and 'lived'*
- Situational and in the moment*
- Rules of thumb and metaphors*
- Personally framed*
- Anecdotal*

News source perspective can be more

- Rational*
- Exhaustive*
- Deliberative*
- Top down*
- Strives to be objective*
- Global and contextual*
- Explaining the complex*
- Broadly framed*
- Statistical and analytical*

Participants understood and made sense of the world through their own personal lens, which could feel very distant from the some of the topics in scope.

Comprehension of the topics was a significant challenge for most. Beyond personal experiences, many relied on the news to inform their views and help them understand



Overall, comprehension barriers were the norm for most of sample

The levels and nature of understanding of the topics varied widely across the sample. For many participants, direct personal experiences were often the starting point for understanding and they would derive their views and interpretation of the pertinent issues from their own direct encounters with the relevant services, whether using the NHS, their transport usage, or feeling the financial implications of taxation. However, beyond this subjective experience, the research indicated that the topics in scope presented significant comprehension challenges for the majority of participants, and more broadly suggests that audiences that have a high understanding of these topics are in a minority. Even participants with self-defined higher levels of understanding said they could struggle with the more complex content.

Grappling with intrinsically complex and technical subject matter

In particular, the intrinsic complexity of macro finance and economics was the greatest barrier to engagement and the area that participants struggled with the most. Specifically, participants often struggled with the very large numbers that could be involved and often felt that they were impossible to judge. Macroeconomics was felt to be a highly technical subject that required very specialist knowledge and specific expertise to understand.

Many participants saw little point in engaging in topics that required considerable personal investment to understand and make sense of. Only the most confident participants within the higher understanding sample group felt they were comfortable with this subject matter. These participants tended to have a background factor (e.g. educational or professional) that explained their relative confidence.

The research suggests that audiences that have a high understanding of the fiscal and financial aspects in particular were in a minority, and that comprehension was a challenge for the majority.

The potential to understand these complex aspects via the news was made even harder as participants were often primarily engaging in news content in snapshots and at headline level, particularly when consuming news on social media. This meant that any news report would require explanation or contextualisation on each occasion if audiences were to develop a better understanding of the topics being reported over time.

Understanding of different views on fiscal policy and macroeconomics

At the time of the research, there was relatively little evidence of understanding the different policy views or positions that could be adopted in relation to tax, public spending, and government borrowing and debt. Participants could struggle to articulate whether there were clearly distinct arguments or points of view. Most participants rarely referenced the contours of any fiscal policy debate that might be relevant, or the different strategic choices or political positions that could be adopted in relation to these areas.

However, this had the potential to change depending upon the political climate and context. In the context of this research for example, participants in Scotland demonstrated a relatively higher awareness of the different and distinct positions relating to fiscal policy and public spending, as these specific topics mapped more clearly on to political identities and divides in the context of Scottish politics. In addition, at the closing stages of the fieldwork, some participants also observed how different political positions appeared to be emerging around fiscal policy through the Conservative party leadership election which was ongoing at the time. Some also drew on what they saw as traditional views of the differences between Labour and Conservative principles relating to taxation and spending policies, but this was in the minority. Beyond these examples, many respondents struggled to define what the different views may be regarding the fiscal and economic aspects of the topics in particular.

Levels and nature of understanding varied across the specific topic areas – understanding of areas such as VAT and government borrowing was often limited



Taxation and VAT

In the main, participants sought to understand what they would be paying and whether there would be any changes to this. Beyond this basic informational need, participants' main questions focused on how tax revenue would be spent, what it would be paying for, how this would be of benefit, and whether it was being spent in the best possible way. However, such questions often had to be prompted, and only surfaced after some deliberation. For many participants, income tax was simply something many were resigned to pay each month, with the main question or concern being how much is left for them to take home.

When it came to understanding VAT, the majority of participants were aware that it existed, but had little sense of the overall weighting, including in relation to income tax. For most participants, VAT, unlike income tax, was seen as less personally directed, less visible, and more diffuse as it was levied across a wide range of goods and services. A minority of participants did show a more in-depth interest in VAT in terms of whether it was appropriately applied to essential goods and services, and some also expressed an interest in understanding more about the amount of VAT that was being paid by people relative to other forms of taxation such as income tax.

Public spending – health, transport, penal system

Many drew on their own experiences, or hearing from others, to inform their understanding of the **health** sector and NHS. There was a general consensus that the service was facing 'huge challenges' and it tended to be an uncontroversial truism among participants that the NHS was 'struggling'. Many felt that the service needed more funding. There was some debate about the extent to which the issues were attributable to Covid or the state of the NHS going into the pandemic. Beneath this, a more nuanced debate was also in evidence in terms of whether there was waste and inefficiency, public misuse of the NHS, or whether reform was needed.

In terms of understanding public spending in **transport**, participants wanted to know more about transport issues that affected them and their journey, whether that be the cost of fuel and travel, or disruptions caused by the rail strikes that took place at the time of the research. To many in the sample, these issues were of more interest than analysing large-scale infrastructure projects whose impact was in the future and not always relevant to them.

Most participants felt they knew very little about the **penal system**. Participants often admitted that they gave the system very little thought, and knew little about how effective it was, its current condition, and what the costs were versus the benefits.

Government borrowing and debt

Government borrowing and debt was the most challenging topic for participants to understand. Many avoided investing the effort required to understand what they saw as a prohibitively complex topic, as well as one that they could struggle to relate to. The highly technical and macro nature of the subject was a barrier for the majority, including some who had self-defined higher levels of understanding on the topics in scope. Some participants admitted that they did not understand why a government borrows money in the first place, and were perplexed as to who would actually lend money to a government when there was no higher authority in the country.

However, despite these significant comprehension challenges, a number of popular beliefs about government borrowing and debt were in evidence among the sample. Many participants had been aware of the high levels of borrowing during the pandemic, and some used wartime levels of borrowing as a reference point. Whilst many were anxious about levels of debt, very few felt able to judge whether the UK was borrowing too much or not. Participants often used their own household analogies to access and judge the topic, in particular the idea that public debt, like any other debt, 'is bad'. Many were concerned about how public debt would be paid off.

Despite comprehension challenges, consistent questions persisted. However, these were often latent



Beyond the default question ‘what does it mean for me?’, participants asked a consistent set of broader questions – but these were often latent

Despite comprehension challenges, a consistent set of broader questions persisted among the sample around how public money was acquired and allocated. These underlying questions included where the money was coming from, whether that be taxation or borrowing, including who was lending money to the UK government. Other common questions included what tax revenues were spent on, and whether they were spent on areas that participants felt were the real priorities, and whether public money was spent in the best possible way or whether it was wasted or mismanaged. Participants were also concerned about the affordability of public spending and borrowing, particularly in light of spending levels during Covid. Many were conscious that choices around spending priorities had to be made, and wanted to know what trade-offs or compromises were entailed. In addition, participants wanted to know how tax, spending and borrowing compare, both over time and with other countries outside the UK.

These questions were often latent, but beyond understanding personal impact, participants valued news sources that could help them understand these broader questions better, and expected them to pursue these on audiences’ behalf.

Where (and who?) is the money coming from?

How will we pay for what we need, particularly in the future, such as social care?

*Who are we borrowing from?
Other governments?*

Where is the money going to?

What areas is the money spent on and in what proportion?

Is ‘my’ money being spent on ‘my priorities’ / ‘the right things’?

Can we afford it?

Can we pay for what we need without taxing or borrowing ‘too much’, particularly currently?

What choices have to be made?

Spending on one area must mean cuts in another. What are the compromises that need to be made?

How does it compare to before? Is it going up or down?

Is it more or less than we have spent or borrowed before?

Is it new money or moving old money?

Are we paying too much and is it spent well enough?

Are we paying too much in tax or enough, and is what we are paying being spent well or wasted?

Beyond understanding ‘what it means for me’, participants valued the news attempting to address these questions on their behalf. The news had a potential role to play in helping audiences understand the topics and have their questions answered.

Reporting that included complex financial and economic content were often hardest to understand. As such, reporting designed to aid comprehension was highly commended



Complex financial and economic analysis

The research indicated that the topics in scope can be challenging for many participants to understand fully, and therefore the BBC output relating to them. This was especially the case for reports featuring macroeconomic and financial analysis. Examples of this type of analysis often appeared in reports that scrutinised the Chancellor's budget and broader fiscal policies, or looked at government borrowing and debt.

Such reports typically contained complex descriptions and analysis of the subject matter, and many struggled to know what to make of the numbers and data that were often a prominent feature. The technical language that was typically used could be a further barrier, and the specialist analysis of spending policies often came across as particularly challenging.

In addition, such analysis could feel very distant and removed from the participant's own world, and their day-to-day life. Consequently, this technical analysis felt relatively abstract, conceptual, and hard to relate to.

Explainer content was highly valued

When the research explored reactions to output that had been intentionally designed to explain complex topics, such as BBC Explainers, participants responded very positively. Many participants strongly commended explanatory output designed to aid comprehension of topics such as government borrowing and debt.

Such output helped engagement as well as comprehension, as participants found the output interesting, in addition to educational. Overall, this type of output was valued for helping participants understand complex topics, and putting the UK into context via meaningful comparisons that also helped participants to form their views. Most participants that were exposed to this material were receptive to being guided and educated on these challenging topics, and their educational intention was appreciated.

Reactions to youth-orientated output (e.g. *Newsround*) was another indication that audiences could be receptive to output that was designed to explain subject matter in an easy to understand way. Such examples were valued by younger participants in particular.

Explanatory output would need to be part of content audiences are already consuming

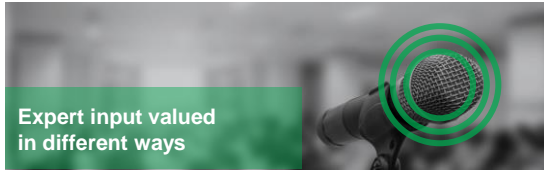
The research indicates that there is some appetite for more explanatory and educational output that will help raise the audience's baseline understanding of relevant content. This will potentially help with comprehension challenges, but not solve them.

Reactions revealed the potential risk of being perceived as 'dumbing down' with such explanatory output though, by making what is complex subject matter too simplistic. Editorial approaches would need to be conscious of these risks in the development of any such output.

Although reactions occasionally indicated that audiences were sometimes sensitive to being patronised, in general these explanatory and educational pieces were appreciated. Audiences found them both interesting and enlightening. Overall, many participants welcomed being educated and informed by news output on these complex topics, though it is important not to assume that audiences will seek this reporting out themselves. Such content would need to be included wherever they are currently consuming the news.

The research indicates that there is some appetite for more explanatory and educational output that will help raise the audience's baseline understanding. However, audiences may not seek this reporting out themselves, and such content would need to be part of news content they are currently consuming.

Third-party expert input had *the potential* to aid comprehension, and also improve perceptions of impartiality by adding an 'independent' perspective to the range of views



Expert input valued in different ways

Expert input could be perceived as helping audiences understand complex topics. Experts could also be seen as independent and objective, and their input often gave a stamp of authority and credibility to a report, as well as adding to the overall range of views in a report, which enhanced participants' perceptions of impartiality.

However, views on how much experts helped general comprehension were mixed, and reports that featured economics specialists and third-party experts describing or explaining intrinsically complex areas could be a real struggle for the majority of participants. Experts could still leave some participants behind with what were felt to be highly technical explanations, especially when without visual aids. Although credible sounding, experts did not always aid understanding of the actual subject matter.

Sometimes a lack of familiarity with the expert was also a barrier, particularly with radio where participants valued the familiarity of presenters and their communication style, and generally trusted what they said.



Provenance of experts often unclear

Participants' understanding of experts and the organisations they represented was often limited. They were often received at a relatively superficial level, and were typically regarded as an 'independent' voice, somebody with an 'academic' background, or an organisation that bases its views on 'research'.

Many participants therefore tended to take such input in good faith and assumed the relevant third party or expert must be competent in what they say. Beyond this, there was little sense of a more detailed or in-depth understanding of expert credentials. There was little evidence of expert organisations having 'a brand' as such, and consequently they tended to be judged by participants at a category level, simply as an 'expert', a 'think tank', an 'academic', an 'independent view', with very little awareness of whether they may have a particular point of view or agenda in relation to the subject matter.



Participants could question authority

Many of the organisations represented were unknown entities for the majority of participants, and in some of the material tested in the research they could feel 'dropped in', without adequate introduction or positioning. Participants were sometimes unsure how much they should rely upon their input, and some did question whether the expert had a particular agenda or outlook.

So although participants tended to take expert input at face value, and often saw expert input as credible and independent, they still had questions about what authority they were bringing to the reporting, and the qualifications and background that underpinned this. Consequently, some participants wanted to know more about their background in order to evaluate their input.

Views on how well experts aided comprehension could be mixed. In some instances, expert input was valued for helping understanding, but in others, experts did not always bring clarity, and still had room to improve the way they communicated with the public.

4.3 Perceptions of impartiality

Impartiality was integral to participants' notions of good quality news, and there was a high degree of consensus about what impartiality means



Impartiality was a key quality criteria for the audience

When asked to define what makes 'good quality news', the criteria that participants articulated were heavily weighted towards what they saw as different elements of impartiality. These included attributes such as 'not being biased by a reporter's views'; 'including a range of views'; 'covering a wide spectrum'; 'giving equal time to both (or all) sides' and an 'even-sided discussion of the facts'.

Other criteria associated with good quality news by participants related to accuracy and rigour, in particular reporting being based on rigorous research and hard evidence, whether data or first-hand accounts.

Accessibility was also an important criterion to participants. This was defined in terms of presenting the news in a user-friendly way that avoided overcomplicating, and using accessible language. Accessibility was seen as particularly important in the context of the topics in scope.

A final important set of quality criteria related to the role of news in challenging and interrogating, where participants wanted reporters and presenters to pose challenging questions, and hold those in authority to account.

Instinctive definitions of impartiality emphasised balance, fairness and neutrality

Participants were asked to define what the word 'impartiality' meant to them, and how they would describe it in the context of news coverage. Overall, there was a high degree of consensus about what impartiality meant in theory across different participants.

Participants' instinctive definitions of impartiality placed importance on covering different views and sides, and doing so in a fair, balanced and neutral way.

Specifically, 'instinctive' definitions placed importance on attributes such as 'covering and explaining different views', 'including a range of opinion and views', being 'balanced and fair to different sides', being 'neutral and not taking sides', and reporting the news with 'no agenda or bias'.

Reactions to 'due impartiality' revealed the importance of trusting editorial decision making

Among the participants who were introduced to the definition of due impartiality, discussing this concept revealed points of overlap with participants' own instinctive definitions of impartiality. Including a range of views, and representation of different views, were some of the strongest elements that resonated for participants. Many were particularly positive about reflecting a diversity and range of views from different parts of the UK in news output.

Sharing the definition of due impartiality with participants also raised the role of editorial decision making, and this, in turn, raised some questions from participants about who decides what is appropriate and which views are significant and require representation. Overall, introducing the definition to participants underlined the importance of trusting the news source to make appropriate judgements and editorial decisions in adhering to due impartiality.

Instinctive definitions emphasised the importance of balance, fairness and neutrality. Sharing the definition of due impartiality raised the role of editorial decision-making and underlined the importance of trusting the news source to make the right judgements.

Three overlapping factors fed into participants' judgements of impartiality



In terms of how participants assessed the impartiality of a given report, three overlapping factors fed into participants' judgements of impartiality:

- **Perceptions of the news source**
- **The participant's own feelings and views about the story being reported**
- **Reactions to how the story was reported at editorial level.**



Participants' own feelings and views about the story tended to be the most dominant factor feeding into their judgments of impartiality.

Perceptions of the news source: Participants consistently highlighted key strengths of BBC News, which they felt were present in the material reviewed



Participants highlighted a range of key strengths they associated with BBC News and perceived these to be reflected in much of the reporting reviewed on the topics in focus

In terms of perceptions of the news source, participants highlighted a range of key strengths associated with BBC News, which they saw reflected in coverage.

These strengths typically included the following:

- Fair and balanced reporting
- Adhering to high professional standards
- Skill in explaining and simplifying complex topics
- Including a wide range of opinions
- Covering a very broad range of stories and topics
- Trustworthy, credible and reliable
- Strong on political and local news
- A good range of presenters
- Catering to a lot of audiences
- Widely accessible.

These attributes were regarded as being present in much of the material reviewed in the research, with participants seeing these attributes exemplified across the pieces they reviewed, overall regarding them as reliable, trustworthy and credible output.

Among the Gaelic and Welsh-speaking sample, the BBC's Gaelic and Welsh services were also highly valued and felt to offer good representation of issues relevant to their communities.

Many saw BBC News as a reliable, trustworthy and credible news source and highlighted a range of key strengths. These attributes were consistent with how participants in the main reacted to the reporting they reviewed as part of the research.

While a range of political biases could be projected on to BBC News, instances of perceived bias were relatively rare when reviewing coverage of the topics in scope

Pre-conceptions of BBC News among a minority of participants did influence their judgements, and these could sometimes be quite entrenched, even in light of what could be regarded as fair reporting on the topics in scope.

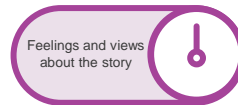
A range of different and often contrasting political biases could be projected onto BBC News depending on the participants' own leanings, including:

- Bias against certain political figures (e.g. Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn)
- Having a left wing or anti-Conservative slant
- Being pro-Conservative and pro-government
- Being in favour of the status quo and establishment, including pro-monarchy.

These pre-conceptions of BBC News stemmed from a range of sources. This included BBC coverage of other topic areas that the participants recalled (in particular, political reporting), which appeared to be the main driver of the BBC's reputation for impartiality. These appeared to be driven by a number of different areas, whether coverage of certain political figures, recall and awareness of criticism of general election and referenda coverage (the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, the 2016 EU referendum), or perceived relationship with government. Feeding into these perceptions were both participants' own recall, often shaped by their personal and political viewpoint, and also coverage of the BBC in the wider media, as well as commentary on social media.

However, when it came to coverage of the topics in scope, BBC News was not particularly thought of as having a point of view or bias on these areas. There were some instances where different perceptions of bias could be activated by some of the reporting used as stimulus material in the research but such instances were relatively rare.

Feelings and views about the story: Lower emotional sensitivity towards the topics and comprehension barriers made the reports less likely to prompt negative reactions



Participants were less emotionally activated by fiscal aspects of the reports shown

Reactions to news coverage were often filtered through a participant's personal lens and the influence of this lens has the potential to be at its most intense when the news touches upon issues that relate to someone's personal, and political, identity. Overall, at the time of the research, reporting of the specific topics in scope did not appear to tap into strong feelings or sensitivities relating to identity or political views. Participants were rarely emotionally activated by the specific subject matter covered in the reporting, in particular the fiscal and financial aspects.

Some coverage of the topics could be a cause of general worry and anxiety, activating a degree of emotional discomfort or even anger by resonating with concerns about the state of the economy or public finances. However, beyond this, the reporting tested in this research did not appear to activate particularly strong feelings about identity or prompt robust partisan defences from participants.

The main exception to this appeared to be in Scotland where the topics in scope more readily mapped onto political identities and divides in the context of Scottish politics. In this context, identity and political sensitivities were relatively more marked compared with the wider sample, and could be observed at times in the way participants in Scotland reacted to some of the BBC output used as stimulus material.

Comprehension issues acted as a barrier to having strong views about the topics being reported

As already outlined, comprehension was often the main challenge for many participants owing to the intrinsically complex nature of the subject matter. These comprehension challenges often acted as a barrier to the participant forming their own views on the topics being covered.

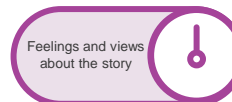
Consequently, participants were often less likely to have a particularly strong point of view on the topics. This, in turn, meant that they were less prone to judging whether they agreed or disagreed with what was being conveyed in the reporting, and therefore felt less need to defend their own point of view if they disagreed with what was being reported.

In addition, in the context of complex subject matter that many struggled to understand, participants were more likely to defer to the authority and expertise of the news report, and accept what was being reported at face value.

Overall, these comprehension challenges therefore affected how participants were able to assess the perceived impartiality of the reporting, and also dialled up the relative importance of other quality criteria such as accessibility.

These topics were less emotionally activating for participants. In addition, comprehension challenges were a barrier to them having strong views on the subject matter and affected the extent to which they could assess impartiality.

Feelings and views about the story: Responses to the stimulus material revealed relatively few accusations of bias on the topics in scope



Reporting could activate feelings about identity

In a minority of instances, sensitivities relating to identity were activated in the reporting tested in the research. For example, participants occasionally questioned how their country or region was portrayed. In these instances, portrayal could come across as one-sided, treating the country or area as a monolith, or only focusing on negative aspects of an area.

These instances were relatively rare, but could surface in relation to coverage of Scotland, where some objected to what they saw as the portrayal of Scotland as 'a country in poverty', for example. This could reinforce a perception among some participants in Scotland that BBC UK-wide news was reported more from the perspective of England.

In addition, participants in Stockton raised objections to the portrayal of Middlesbrough in one of the reports, seeing the report as being one-sided and negative in its characterisation of the town, and unrepresentative in its selection of local people as interviewees. The participants put these issues down to deficient journalism though, rather than any sense of bias.

There were relatively rare examples where participants questioned whether reporting on the topics in scope revealed political bias

In the small number of instances where this occurred, this could be a perception of appearing 'pro-conservative' in Scotland, or other reports in England and Wales that were potentially perceived as against the government.

Across the sample, participants valued the role of the news in holding those in authority to account, including the government of the day. However, some participants questioned reporting if it appeared to focus only on critiquing the negative aspects of the policy, whilst not referencing any benefits or positives that may result, whether actual or potential. Where such instances occurred, it was usually among participants that were more politically aligned with the government of the day. Again, these instances were relatively rare in the research in relation to the topics in scope.

The research suggested there were greater challenges in reporting these topics in Scotland whilst maintaining perceptions of impartiality

Reactions to some of the reporting tested in Scotland revealed potential for heightened sensitivity towards the topics in scope and their coverage in news output.

A number of contextual factors were feeding into this. In Scotland, there were more strongly perceived differences between the main political parties on tax and spending policy, and the fiscal relationship between the Scottish and UK governments was seen as very relevant to the potential independence of Scotland. These all served to make reactions to reporting of the topics in scope more politically sensitive compared with the wider sample.

As a result, participants in Scotland could be relatively more engaged in the substantive fiscal and financial aspects of the reporting and were therefore more likely to have stronger opinions about some of the subject matter.

In addition, some participants in Scotland recalled criticism of BBC coverage of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. This had a background influence on how some regarded BBC News coverage of Scotland overall, and in turn affected how they responded to the reporting on some of these topics.

Whilst the reporting tested in this research occasionally activated identity or partisan sensitivities, these arose only in a minority of instances. However, overall, participants in Scotland showed higher levels of sensitivity towards the specific topics in scope in this research.

Reactions to how a story was reported: In light of engagement and comprehension challenges, judging the impartiality of individual reports was more reliant on surface criteria



A range of content signals were used by participants as short cuts for judging the impartiality of a report in the moment

In light of engagement and comprehension challenges, judging the impartiality of individual reports on the topics in scope was often reliant on surface criteria, and a range of editorial level attributes were used as short cuts for assessing the impartiality of a given report. These included more objectively assessed 'harder' attributes such as including a range of views, as well as more intuitively judged 'softer' attributes such as tone of voice.



'Harder' signals

Harder signals were more cognitively assessed by participants and tended to be more overt and demonstrable, and easier for participants to identify and articulate. There was often a degree of consensus about what constituted many of these harder signals. If they were perceived to be sufficiently present in a given report then that report was more likely to be judged as fair and impartial by participants.

Examples of primary 'harder' signals included:

- Leading with central 'facts and figures'
- Including a range of different views and perspectives
- Covering different sides and having a balance of views.



I thought this was well reported. It gave a good range of stats, it was clearly explained, gave opinions from the opposition, government response, real-life experiences of those training. It was engaging and clearly structured.

(Male, 35-44, C2D, Dumfries, Medium*)



'Softer' signals

Softer signals were more emotionally judged and intuitively sensed by participants. These signals were by their nature more subtle and harder for participants to discern. How they were assessed was therefore more open to subjective interpretation and there was less consensus about how a softer signal, such as the tone of voice of a reporter, should be judged.

Examples of primary 'softer' signals included:

- Tone of voice and demeanour
- Choice of language and words used to describe
- The perceived tenor of the reporting.



[Impartiality] is hard to police and monitor. For example, the tone that someone reports in. We all notice these things and it is subtle but we notice that bias.

(Female, 25-34, BC1, London, Higher)

Participants were more reliant on these surface attributes in the context of these often complex topics.

Reactions to how a story was reported: When judging the impartiality of the reporting on these topics, participants tended to focus on four main aspects



A range of content signals were used by participants as short cuts for judging the impartiality of a report in the moment

When judging the impartiality of the reporting, participants tended to focus on four main attributes in terms of: including a range of views; how the reporter or presenter questioned and challenged views; covering different sides of the story; and perceptions of overall balance in the reporting.



Including a range of views



Questioning & challenging views



Covering different sides



Perceptions of balance

Overall, there were a minority of instances where some of these attributes were felt to be missing from reported tested.

Reactions to how a story was reported: Including a range of views and questioning and challenging views were felt to be at the heart of impartiality from an audience perspective



Including a range of views

A key area of focus for participants when judging impartiality was the extent to which a report was felt to include a range of different views. Reports that were felt to include a good range of views were more likely to be considered impartial, and this specific attribute would be highlighted by participants in both the 'instinctive' or 'informed' sample groups.

For participants, including a range of views in reporting entailed a number of elements:

- Encompassing multiple perspectives in the round, not just two sides
- Including the main sides of the political debate, typically government and main opposition
- Making efforts to include more minor political parties as well
- Including people being affected by the story
- Including an independent expert
- Including views from different levels in any given hierarchy.

On this last point, many participants felt it was important to include both senior figures who were responsible and accountable, but also to hear the perspectives of others involved at a less senior level. This could include people involved in the front-line delivery of services or people being directly affected by the story. Including these views in the reporting was often commended by participants, who would also highlight reports when they felt this perspective had been omitted. Overall, the majority of the reports tested in the research were often commended for the inclusion of a range of views, whilst a relatively small number of cases were questioned in terms of whether enough views had been included.

If these ingredients were felt to be missing or suboptimal, respondents would be more likely to question the impartiality of reporting. When they were felt to be present in reporting, respondents would often highlight and commend a report as a result, in particular the inclusion of a range of views.



Questioning and challenging views

How presenters and reporters 'questioned and challenged' was an important area for judging impartiality for participants. The approach taken by an interviewer was a key short cut for judging the impartiality of the report and of the wider brand, and how reporters and presenters went about questioning was subject to considerable audience scrutiny.

Holding politicians and other figures in authority to account was seen as an important role for news, and politicians in particular were often perceived by participants as evasive in interview, and adept at not answering the questions put to them. Participants therefore wanted reporters and presenters to challenge and interrogate. How participants judged impartiality in these instances was often based on softer signals, such as tone of voice and the emotional tenor of the interviewer. Participants commended a number of interview techniques that they felt were both effective and impartial, including calmly persevering and applying appropriate pressure when needed, presenting alternative arguments to respond to, and not interrupting and allowing the interviewee time to reply.

In contrast, participants would highlight examples where they felt the interviewer was either not challenging enough, or when they felt they were being overly aggressive in their approach to the interviewee. An overly aggressive approach could be construed as the interviewer imposing their own opinion on the discussion. Such instances were also criticised from an effectiveness point of view, as participants felt that the interviewee was forced into a defensive stance, and the overall interview risked descending into an unproductive clash of different viewpoints. In all, across the body of stimulus material, only a few examples were highlighted where participants felt this might be an issue.

Reactions to how a story was reported: Covering different sides of a story and also providing a balanced and rounded assessment were also seen as important ingredients of impartial reporting



Covering different sides

It was a commonly held view among participants that every story had two or more sides, and this was seen as a fundamental truism that was relevant to most topics by participants. When it came to reporting tax, public spending, and government borrowing and debt, participants generally felt that each story should have two or more sides to it, and that these should be included in any given report.

In light of this principle, if participants felt there was an absence of an alternative view, different side, counter argument or, as participants tended to articulate it, 'the other side of the story', this could elicit criticism, including when a participant was not always able to articulate what that alternative view might be.

When such examples were highlighted by participants, they could either suspect a report of trying to push or promote a certain point of view, or simply judge the instance as a case of poor journalism by not appearing to make efforts to seek out other viewpoints, or include a spread of opinion on the topic being covered.

Across the range of reports used as stimulus material, most were felt to cover the different sides that were felt to be relevant the issue or story being reported. In contrast, a small number of examples were perceived as potentially being one-sided.

If reports were perceived to be one-sided or appeared to focus only on the negatives of a given story, this could be highlighted by participants. Whilst participants were not always able to articulate what the 'other side' might be, they tended to feel that something was missing from the report overall.



Perceptions of balance

When participants defined what impartiality meant to them, 'being balanced' was seen as an important principle, and their general assumption was often that balance meant giving equal time to different sides. However, when reacting to the reporting tested in the research, the main issue that emerged in terms of perceptions of balance was less focused on giving equal time to opposing views or different sides of an argument, and more about covering both the pros and cons, or positives and negatives, of different decisions and policies covered in the reporting.

Participants highlighted reporting that they felt appeared to only focus on the negatives of a given story, without any reference to potential positives. For example, a report covering the cancellation or reduction of a large-scale infrastructure project could be seen as only focusing on the negative implications of this change in terms of not fulfilling a policy commitment, rather than also referring to the cost and time savings that could result. Another example included a report that highlighted a rise in taxation, which was felt to focus only on the negative impact this might have on people's finances, without reference to the benefits of increased tax revenue, and what this might pay for in terms of public services.

Whilst participants felt the news needed to hold the government of the day to account and challenge their claims, policies and performance, some participants wanted to see inclusion of both potential negatives and positives of decisions or policies. Accordingly, participants highlighted a very small number of instances where only focusing on the negatives was felt to be an issue.

Examples of participant reactions to content in their own words

Engagement

Personal relevance, relatable human stories, and language helped to make output more engaging, but needed to be balanced with other quality criteria.

[About a topical debate show clip] *What I liked about her was she said her piece which related to the wider macro economic picture but then she tapered it down to the what it means more for the individual.*

(Female, 35-44, C2DE, Dumfries, Medium*)

I like the way the reporter writes about actual people's stories. It made me more interested in reading the article as I felt a connection with the people's lives that are affected by this issue.

(Male, 35-44, BC1, Enniskillen, Lower)

I like at the end with the personal experiences... I think it makes it way more personal, you can connect to it... It just makes it way easier to follow and you can understand what they're talking about.

(Female, 18-24, C1C2, Newport, Lower)

I did not like the headline. Over-dramatic and negative. This is not the first time in history that prices have increased and taxes have gone up. We have been through these periods before and society has lived to tell the tale.

(Female, 35-44, BC1, Enniskillen, Lower)

I think the writer was a bit too informal. As it's a fairly serious subject, I don't think it should be the type of article where the writer tries to use humour.

(Male, 25-34, BC1, Dundee, Lower)

Comprehension

Explanatory content was valued, and experts could improve understanding but needed to avoid being too technical and need more introduction.

One of the reports was... about national debt and I actually thought in laymen's terms it was excellent... if people had more of that, they might understand it more.

(Male, 35-54, BC1, Gillingham, Medium)

I liked how the presenter clearly explained the story then went on to interview a more informed person who discussed in further detail. The political correspondent very clearly and slowly explained the situation.

(Female, 25-34, BC1, Dundee, Lower)

The presentation was good, you have to have graphs and make it interesting. It is a heavy subject, and there were subtitles as well and that was a good thing, and it was talked through at a good pace.

(Female, 35-54, BC1, Gillingham, Medium)

In the clip... there was no mention of the qualifications of the contributors, which I would like in order to evaluate the information they contributed, and their political leanings.

(Male, 55-75, C2D, Stockton, Medium)

A lot of the articles I see can have a lot of jargon, and things like that, which can be quite difficult to understand if you're not into politics. I just like it to be quite simple.

(Male, 25-34, BC1, Dundee, Lower)

Impartiality

Impartiality of reports was judged by participants using a range of signals – where these were felt to be missing, they could question if there was bias.

I like the debate format, and that you got to hear both sides of the issue clearly... Each speaker was given time and it was a civil discussion... I felt like there was good representation of all viewpoints.

(Male, 25-34, BC1, London, Higher)

I liked that it included numerous different people speaking about the topic. I feel like this helps to give a wider view of the story.

(Male, 18-24, C1C2, Newport, Lower)

The interviewer allowed the speaker time to speak, to get an important point across. This so often isn't the case in these types of interviews, where interviewers sometimes can be trigger happy and constantly interrupt... This journalist... allowed respectful time.

(Male, 45-54, ABC1, Kingston, Higher)

[The presenter] *was confrontational... she was jumping on him all the time. There was a slant.*

(Male, 55-75, C2D, Stockton, Medium)

As a piece of reporting, it wasn't neutral, it was very anti-prison... There were no positives until the final few lines.

(Female, 55-75, BC1, West Devon, Higher)



Main findings: Other genres

Other genres played a more minor role than news in informing opinions on the topics, and impartiality was not seen as a core criterion outside news

Other genres could inform opinions and attitudes towards some of the topics but to a much lesser extent than news

Other genres had the potential to inform participants' opinions about some of the topic areas included in the research at a more general level; for example, documentaries that focused on a specific subject like transport infrastructure or drama that conveyed what it was like in a busy hospital or prison. However, the research suggests that their overall impact is at a lower level than news.

Non-news genres had the potential to inform perceptions in different ways:

- Documentaries and long-form current affairs had the potential to make a valued contribution to understanding of the topics.
- Comedy and satire that focused on the news specifically could play a role in the audience engaging with and digesting recent news events and talking points.
- Some drama output could also contribute to forming, or confirming, an impression of a given area, such as the NHS or prisons, as long as it felt authentic and credible.
- Soap operas were well known for raising awareness of different issues, whether health-related or social.

However, beyond documentaries, participants' motives for engaging with other genres were very different from the need to be informed. With genres such as drama, comedy and soaps, emotional resonance, entertainment and familiarity were the main audience needs, and drivers of engagement accordingly.

Impartiality was not seen as a core criterion for non-news genres

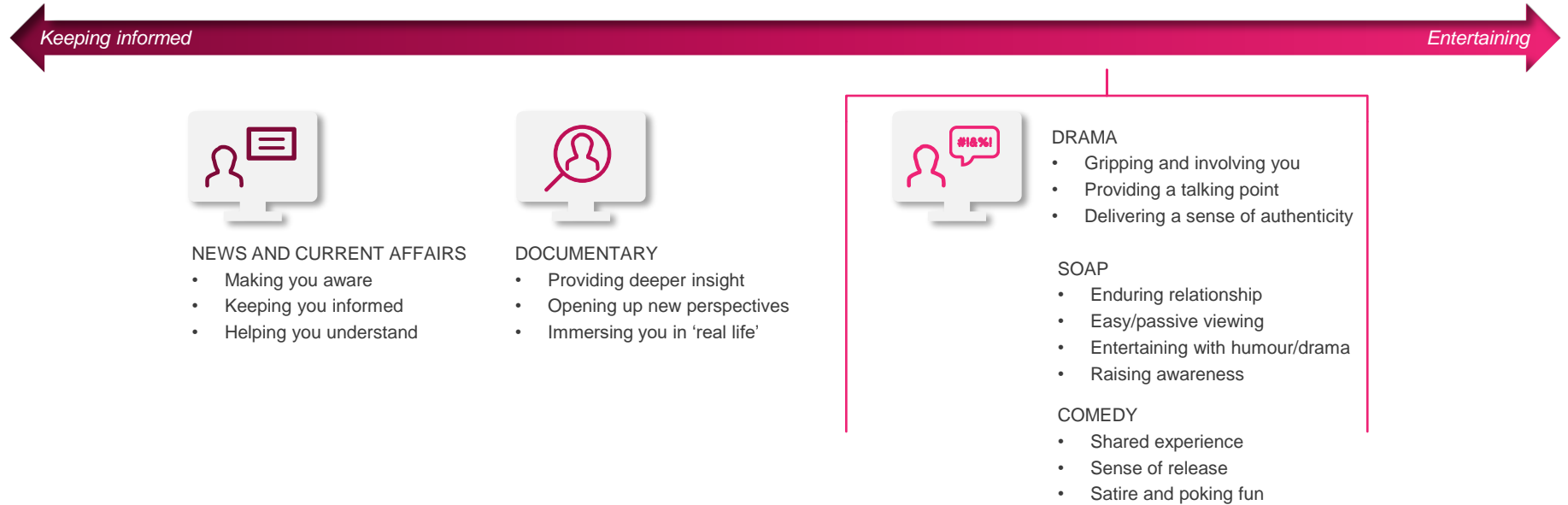
Impartiality was seen by participants as a core criterion of quality in the context of news, and was universally recognised as a requirement. And, in the main, the BBC's reputation for impartiality was driven by news content, and in particular political coverage.

Although some level of accuracy was seen as important when portraying a serious topic (including in dramas and soaps), as a genre only factual documentaries, outside news, had higher audience expectations in terms of presenting a rigorous account based on the evidence and, if relevant to the programme, reflecting different arguments and viewpoints surrounding the topic.

Impartiality, as commonly defined by participants, was not seen as appropriate for other genres, in particular for drama. Any questions of bias or a perceived lack of balance had to be fairly overt to even register, and even then could be seen as a legitimate part of the creative vision or authorial message of an output.

The concept of 'due impartiality' was felt to have some relevance to non-news genres at an overall output level, across the BBC's portfolio of programming, rather than at a specific series or individual programme level. The elements of due impartiality that were seen as potentially relevant in this way were in reference to including a diversity of views and voices across overall output, and this was also seen as consistent with preserving the individual licence of writers and performers at a programme level.

Genres were experienced and assessed in different ways. The main value drivers of each genre for participants included the following



Audience needs, quality criteria and also expectations varied across the different non-news genres.

Drama was primarily valued for its ability to involve and transport the audience, and a feeling of authenticity was often an important criterion



Drama was valued for authenticity and insight

Participants defined a good drama as being a highly engaging experience, where they felt gripped or transported in some way into another world. Drama was primarily valued in these terms, though bringing understanding and insight into new experiences and worlds was also acknowledged, particularly worlds where the participant felt they had little direct experience. Authenticity was a key quality criteria in drama. This tended to mean emotional resonance and whether the content 'rang true' to participants and chimed with their own experience, pre-conceptions or how they imagined things. It was this emotional truth that mattered to participants, rather than a stricter form of 'factual accuracy' that would be more associated with a genre such as documentaries. For example, whether the vision of life inside a prison felt real, or whether the portrayal of the NHS or a busy A&E department came across as a recognisable setting that resonated with participants' own experiences of hospital. In contrast, inauthenticity in the context of drama could be strongly criticised as unrealistic and could be a compelling reason to disengage.

Greater expectation to be authentic in drama rather than impartial

In the context of a 'serious' drama, participants often expected that a level of accuracy underpinned a programme's portrayal of a given area, and this was seen as important to the output's authenticity. Participants often expected that the output would be based on some level of research or personal experience. For example, this meant that incidents that happened in a drama 'could have happened in real life', that procedures were based on 'the real thing', or that diagnoses were broadly correct in medical terms. There was an expectation that 'serious' drama would have a level of truthfulness in its portrayal of its chosen subject, and that it could be trusted not to mislead the audience.

There was awareness that drama can also possess a message, and that making a point may be the motivation of the author. Such motives tended to be attributed by participants to the author of the drama rather than the commissioner.

There was no expectation to adhere to impartiality in drama, but a 'serious' drama was expected to adhere to some level of authenticity. Accuracy was expected, but how this was applied was more open to debate and interpretation as participants struggled to articulate a more precise standard of accuracy in this context.

Impartiality was not an audience expectation for drama as it was seen as too constraining in such creative output where it was important to conserve authorial freedoms – depicting experiences without compromise or constraint was part of the integrity of the output. Some also felt that there was a truth that needed to be portrayed. Participants did expect 'serious' drama to adhere to some level of accuracy and essential truthfulness in its portrayal of a potentially important topic, though how this was applied was more open to debate. There was consciousness of the power of drama, especially when covering subjects less well known to audiences. As part of this, participants often expected an authorial integrity and trusted that a serious drama would not be misleading, even taking into account a certain degree of dramatic licence.

In terms of the topics in scope, drama in general and the specific output explored in the research did not appear to play a significant role in shaping views of topics such as income tax, VAT or government borrowing and debt. Portrayals of the NHS in programmes like *Casualty* and *This is Going to Hurt* usually appeared to confirm participants' own views of a busy, sometimes stressful working environment, and a pressured NHS, which could be integral to the drama itself. Examples of overt references to funding were not mentioned spontaneously by the sample, even when relevant excerpts were played during discussions. The portrayal of the prison system in *Time* could be seen as providing an insight into prison life and could play more of a role in informing participants' impressions of the state of the system given a lack of personal direct experience. However, it also often confirmed commonly held pre-conceptions of a prison environment. Whilst the drama was perceived by participants as giving an impression of the system as dysfunctional, overt references to prison funding were not picked up by participants, including when played as an excerpt during discussions.

Overall, impartiality *per se* was not raised spontaneously or seen as a relevant concept by participants in the context of drama, including in relation to the programmes explored in the research. There was though a feeling that authenticity was an important criteria.

Soap operas were valued for the relationship and familiarity with the characters, but were also known for raising awareness of a range of topics and issues



Soap operas were valued for comfort viewing and familiarity

Soap operas were primarily valued for regular 'comfort' viewing for their audiences, and a strong sense of familiarity with the characters and their lives. Viewers often talked in affectionate terms about how they had been watching different soap operas for a number of years, and over time, growing attached to different characters. It was these characters, their lives and experiences that were the main driver and focus of engagement for soap audiences.

Soaps were also seen as playing a role in raising awareness of different topics or issues, and this was a feature that was often spontaneously highlighted by participants that viewed soaps on a regular basis. Participants pointed to the inclusion of a message at the end of an episode that signposted viewers to relevant support as evidence of this role.

The issues that soaps were perceived as covering tended to fall into two main categories. Some topics were seen as strictly educative and informative, for example when dealing with health-related issues, such as a character having a stroke or experiencing a mental health issue. Other issues covered by soaps were seen as more thought provoking, potentially tackling a topic that may be uncomfortable viewing, for example when dealing with an issue such as sexual assault. All soaps were seen to feature such issues whether from the BBC or other broadcasters such as ITV.

Awareness raising was not seen as controversial by soap audiences

Overall, participants who were regular viewers of soaps, and who talked about the awareness-raising examples, generally approved of this aspect of the output. For some, it added a level of seriousness to such output.

In addition, viewers commended the social purpose and value of this aspect of the output. Some felt it was important to reflect different societal or health issues in terms of portraying what goes on in the real world. Such content could build a sense of relevance into the programme, and could also play a valued educational role, helping audiences to understand a given topic that was deemed to be important in some way.

Whilst participants who watched soaps mostly viewed the awareness-raising element positively, some participants could be more critical if output came across as too educative, moving away from being lighter entertainment to something more didactic, and consequently, in their view, less enjoyable to watch.

Participants felt that if soaps were to play a role in raising awareness about certain issues, then it was important that they did so in a way that was authentic, accurate and well-researched, and did justice to the important issue that was being spotlighted.

In terms of public spending and tax, soaps were not seen as touching upon these types of topics particularly. When discussing soaps and also reviewing relevant content, there was very little reference to fiscal topics of any kind. Participants generally did not pick up on the setting or backdrop of the soap except portrayal of a GP's surgery in *Doctors*. More generally, when soaps situated the storyline in a setting relevant to the topics in scope (such as a prison in an episode of *EastEnders*), this was generally just seen as a backdrop to the main drama, rather than making any particular points about the prison system, for example.

Soaps' awareness-raising role tended not to be viewed as controversial, but participants felt that soaps had some influence and it was therefore important 'to get it right' when portraying a given issue or serious topic, whether health-related or social.

Comedy was valued for a sense of release but could also have a role beyond just entertainment and amusement



Freedom from constraint was felt to be more important than impartiality in comedy

Comedy was appreciated for its sense of release and as a way of relaxing. However, some forms of comedy could also serve a more serious purpose for participants – for example, the role of satire in holding power to account, or stand-up comedy in pushing boundaries and challenging societal taboos.

In terms of news and current affairs, for some participants panel shows like *Have I Got News For You* or *Mock the Week*, and also stand-up comedy, could be a lighter and more digestible way of processing what had been going on in the news, in particular politics and other key newsworthy events that had become common talking points in some way. In light of this, it was mainly news-focused satire that had the potential to play a role in informing participants' views of the specific topics in scope i.e. taxation, public spending, and government of the day fiscal policies.

However, if any more serious points were being taken from examples of comedy output, it tended to be directed at the government of the day, opposition or main political parties at a broader level, and general competence and/or integrity, more than a commentary on the specific topic areas that the research was focused on.

BBC comedy explored in the research such as the *Now Show* or *Have I Got News For You* was generally not seen as spontaneously raising issues regarding impartiality. The government of the day of whatever persuasion was accepted as the natural target for satirists. Although some more pro-government of the day participants could feel that such commentary would appeal more to audiences with a more anti-government of the day view, this did not spontaneously lead to calls for a more impartial approach in comedy output. This included among those favourable to the government of the day who still supported freedom to mock, albeit more wearily. This freedom to mock those in power was generally seen as more relevant in comedy than impartiality.

Freedom from constraint was felt to be more important in comedy – any idea of limitation via impartiality was often controversial. There was a tension though between the need for freedom from constraints in comedy and the need to navigate changing and varied sensitivities, often shaped by different generational outlooks.

Situation comedy tended to be seen as pure entertainment. Whilst the setting could be based on a relatively serious context such as community service, participants did not appear to be forming any impression based upon how a comedy portrayed such a setting.

Overall, any idea of limiting comedy via impartiality was often controversial. In the context of satirical panel shows, participants felt that it was important that comedians had freedom to 'poke fun' at those in power. Humour was also seen as playing a role in pushing boundaries, and that some comedy would always be potentially at risk of causing controversy or offence in some way.

Comedy had to navigate varied and changing tastes

The discussions around comedy did reveal a tension between the need for freedom from constraint and the need to cater to varied and changing sensitivities. These were often defined by generational differences, and also, to an extent, by gender.

There were different views on the general state of comedy across the sample. Some older participants saw what was described as political correctness as a constraining influence on what would be permitted in comedy today when compared with the past, owing to what they saw as a fear of offending. Other participants highlighted the potential harm that comedy could cause through potential stereotyping and the way it could portray certain people, and felt that comedy output needed to be mindful of these potential sensitivities and risks.

These broader cultural tensions and evolving sensitivities surrounding comedy were more important to participants than impartiality *per se*.

Documentaries were valued for insight and expected to be accurate and based on rigorous research and exhaustive evidence



Documentaries were generally valued as educative and insightful

Documentaries were valued for going beyond what is available in news output and delving more deeply into a specific topic. They could play an important and influential role in helping audiences understand a given topic, and when participants engaged with long-form documentaries and current affairs as part of the research, they often felt that their understanding of a particular topic had been greatly enhanced by the experience.

Examples used in this research included long-form documentaries that covered the NHS, large-scale transport infrastructure projects, the experience of probation services, and the cost of living issues being faced by people living in different circumstances. Across all of these instances, participants often found such output informative and insightful, including sometimes describing the output as 'eye-opening'. It was clear from the research that such documentaries had the potential to make a valued contribution to general understanding of the topics in scope.

However, whilst participants did often watch documentaries in general, none had previously watched the specific output used as stimulus material in this research, and engagement with long-form content that covered these specific topics could not be assumed. Overall responses indicated that the news was more likely to play a role in developing participants' comprehension of the topics in scope, compared with the type of documentaries used as stimulus material in this research. Therefore whilst documentaries had the potential to educate and inform, engagement could not be assumed with regards to the topics in scope.

Documentaries were expected to be based on a rigorous process of research and consequently to be fair in their portrayal of the subject matter

The insight and depth provided by documentaries was felt to be the most important criteria for participants. In terms of the role of impartiality, to an extent documentaries had permission from participants to express a certain point of view, as long as this point of view was based on a rigorous process of investigation and grounded in the evidence. Participants generally expected that a rigorous process of investigation would by definition be open minded and have explored all of the available evidence. In addition, participants felt it was important to reference different or other points of view that may be relevant.

Overall, the BBC documentaries used as stimulus material in the research were largely well regarded by participants and seen as in depth, high quality, insightful and interesting. A small number of participants did raise questions in two instances about whether output had explored all the aspects of the subject matter thoroughly enough. This included whether all the relevant viewpoints or all of the implications of the topic in focus were covered. Participants placed emphasis on the importance of showing different sides as part of a rigorous investigation, and making the required effort to include a range of views in a documentary, if they were thought to be relevant. Whilst not explicitly referencing impartiality *per se* in relation to documentaries, these attributes were also often associated with perceptions of impartiality in relation to news output, for example including a range of views, and showing different sides of the story or issue being covered.

Documentaries had to be based on a rigorous process of research and be true to their subject. This included an expectation that they would explore all the evidence and also reference different points of view where relevant.

For more creative genres, due impartiality was more appropriate when applied at an overall portfolio level, particularly in terms of reflecting a diversity of views across overall BBC output

The concept of due impartiality was seen as more appropriate at an overall output level in the context of more creative genres in particular

In general, participants did not spontaneously raise the subject of impartiality in relation to genres other than news included in the research. When discussed in focus groups, the idea of limiting creative genres and what they say to a commonly understood definition of impartiality, often defined by them as showing different sides, being balanced, and having no agenda, seemed surprising and inappropriate to participants. In general, having to adhere to any such standards was seen as being too restrictive and overly constraining, particularly in the context of creative output such as drama. Participants generally felt it was important to conserve creative and authorial freedoms across these genres.

When discussing the concept of due impartiality, participants were more comfortable with a form of due impartiality that was applied to output as a whole, rather than within a single programme or series in more creative genres. Participants strongly supported the need to preserve the individual expression of artists, writers and entertainers, but also commended the idea of reflecting a diversity of views and experiences at an overall output and portfolio level. In this regard, a small minority of participants felt the BBC needed to be more committed to ensuring there was a range of different perspectives at an overall output level by ensuring writers were drawn from across social groups and had a range of outlooks, and that these were also given appropriate prominence in scheduling so that audiences had opportunities to see a range of views. These perspectives could be based more on conjecture rather than recall of specific viewing experiences.

Overall, for creative genres, participants saw the concept of 'due impartiality' as more relevant across the BBC's portfolio, rather than at a specific series or episode level, as this meant ensuring a diversity of views and voices across overall output while still preserving the individual licence of writers and performers at an individual programme level.



I don't think you can do it [due impartiality] when somebody is writing a script because how can they do it? It has to be their opinion or their view of the reality of it so how can it be impartial?
(Male, 45-54, C2D, Elgin, Medium*)

If a drama is not based on real events and that is their [the writer's] opinion then it's fine [not to be duly impartial] but if you are talking about something serious and needs to be factual then you have to do it as it is.
(Female, 45-54, C2D, Elgin, Medium)

[The BBC] should cover the whole spectrum not just one issue when thinking about all its programmes.
(Female, 45-54, C2D, Elgin, Medium)

The challenge is the person who's going to be watching this show isn't necessarily going to be also the same person who is going to be watching the other counterargument.
(Male, 35-44, ABC1, Nottinghamshire, Higher)

If it's news, I understand that should be impartial, but on a series or what you're watching to get interested in, it's actually quite good to get someone's spin on it. It helps to paint a picture.
(Female, 25-34, ABC1, Birmingham, Higher)

In their own words



Drama

They have to be pretty realistic and pretty authentic. If something feels false and not believable I will not tune in again.

(Female, 35-44, ABC1, East Anglia, Medium*)

When it doesn't look realistic it becomes apparent... when something doesn't look right or wouldn't happen in real life I would question it then, for that drama it is important that it is realistic.

(Female, 25-34, ABC1, East Sussex, Lower)

Drama can exaggerate a bit...it is drama...unlike documentary or news.

(Male, 55-75, C2DE, Warrington, Lower)

It's like learning how the system works. What people might be like in prisons. What kind of crime and things happen... and about... a court process, because that's always involved in prison dramas as well.

(Female, 25-34, ABC1, East Sussex, Lower)

It's an insight into a world that is believable... you are a fly on the wall to something you don't normally get access to.

(Female, 35 44, ABC1, East Anglia, Medium)

It's... a very powerful platform, because some of those things you can walk away and think 'Wow is that really what it's like?'. And it's a drama, so it's a story someone's told, so it's not necessarily based on fact...

(Female, 35-44, ABC1, Nottinghamshire, Higher)



Soaps

I watched [a soap] with my daughter and she didn't know anything about a stroke so they educated her and she knows more about it and recovery as a result of a soap plot.

(Female, 35-44, ABC1, East Anglia, Medium)

I do think it's good. There is a lot of people that are watching [soaps] that will raise awareness to them.

(Female, 25-34, ABC1, East Sussex, Lower)

It is good if they are true to life... soaps can influence a lot of people so it's important that they do their research and they do it well and act it out properly and make sure it comes across as important and with meaning and feeling and not make it too comedy.

(Female, 55 75, C2DE, Stockport, Lower)

Documentaries

I liked how it personified a big issue [relating to the criminal justice system]... it took a topic that had been sensationalised in the media and told the story with more nuance and involved the humans involved in it. You could see both sides of the arguments... it made the issues much easier to develop opinions.

(Female, 25 34, ABC1, Birmingham, Lower)

It has to be factual, not one-sided, as real as the real-life events are. You just want to see what the facts are.

(Male, 45-54, C2D, Elgin, Medium)



Comedy

[About a satirical panel show] They touch on all these things. None of them are biased, they can take the mickey out of any politician whether they are left or right, and it is funny and it's better to laugh about it than worry about it.

(Male, 55-75, C2D, Stockton, Medium)

There is cleverness, there is current affairs in there and poking fun at people in power... someone in power has always had fun made of them.

(Female, 45 54, C2D, Elgin, Medium)

The truth comes out when you are making a joke and you are relaxed. I am laughing most of the time, it's not too serious but I do pick out a few things that I didn't know before.

(Female, 35-54, BC1, Gillingham, Medium)

As we've gotten a little bit older, our tastes have changed. And the people put in charge, they have different sense of humour to us. I've found this at work, when you're working with younger people, they laugh at things, sometimes, you grimace at.

(Male, 55-75, C2DE, Stockport, Lower)

Comedians now use comedy to pass on their views about political correctness and use it as a platform to make those points.

(Female, 45-54, C2D, Elgin, Medium)



Summary conclusion

Overall, the research did not identify particular concerns with perceived impartiality in BBC output on these topics, but there were a minority of cases where the signifiers that participants looked for to denote impartiality were perceived as missing from content tested

In the media, news is the most significant and influential genre for informing views

This audience research indicates that whilst personal experiences are the most important factor in informing people's views on the topics in scope, when it comes to media it is news that is significantly the most influential genre in shaping views on public spending, taxation, and government borrowing and debt. And for news, impartiality is a core criterion for audiences.

There was evidence that other genres (dramas, documentaries, and comedies) can inform audience opinions on the topics in scope, but this is to a much lesser extent than news. In addition, impartiality was not considered to be a core criterion for genres like drama, soaps and comedy.

The topics in scope did not typically trigger identity or partisan sensitivities

For news output, compared with previous research (e.g. Ofcom 2022*), taxation, public spending, and government borrowing and debt were less emotionally activating topics for participants. In general, the material on these subjects tested in this research did not tend to trigger identity or partisan sensitivities that earlier research has shown can drive strong reactions and influence perceptions of impartiality.

In addition to lower emotional sensitivity, the bulk of the sample could often struggle with understanding the topics in scope. Complexity and comprehension challenges also meant that participants were less likely to have strong personal views on the topics in scope.

Overall, participants did not tend to raise significant concerns about bias in BBC output on the topics in scope

Engagement and comprehension were often prerequisites to judging impartiality. Therefore, the engagement and especially comprehension challenges affected the extent to which participants were able to assess impartiality. Lower emotional sensitivities coupled with comprehension challenges meant participants were more likely to defer to the perceived authority and expertise of news reporting, and generally did not raise accusations of bias.

Participants highlighted a range of key strengths associated with BBC News which they typically saw reflected in coverage of the topics in consideration. For a minority of participants, their perceptions of the BBC's wider political reporting had more of an impact on their views than coverage of the specific topics in scope for this research.

Whilst some sensitivities were evident in reactions to the reporting tested, these were relatively rare. Participants in Scotland, however, demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to the topics compared with other groups, which could shape how they reacted to some of the reporting tested.

Engagement and comprehension challenges relating to the topics in scope meant participants often relied upon surface criteria as short cuts to assess impartiality. There were a minority of cases where audiences felt certain signifiers of impartiality could be missing from the reporting tested. For example, if they felt a wider range of views should have been included; if they thought interviewees were not challenged enough or were challenged too aggressively; if they thought the report appeared to cover only one side; or if a report was perceived as only focusing on the negative. However, overall, the research did not identify particular concerns from participants with perceived impartiality in BBC output on these topics.

*Ofcom, *Drivers of perceptions of due impartiality: The BBC and the wider news landscape*, 2022



Technical appendix

Sample

As part of the research, Jigsaw spoke to 127 members of the public in depth interviews and focus groups from 24 locations across the UK. The sample was recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population.

The following slides set out how the sample was structured across the two stages of the research.

Sample structure for Stage 1: depth interviews

Stage 1: 25 x Depth Interviews						
Socio-economic group	Gender	Age group	Topic interest & understanding	BBC/BBC News relationship	Political leanings	Locations
ABC1 x 6 BC1 x 6 C1C2 x 7 DE x 6	Male x 10 Female x 15	18-24 x 5 25-34 x 5 35-44 x 5 45-54 x 5 55-70 x 5	High x 6 Medium x 9 Low x 10	Heavy x 10 Medium x 9 Light x 6	<u>England & Wales</u> Leave x 8 Remain x 8 <u>Scotland</u> No Scottish Independence x 3 Yes Scottish Independence x 3 <u>Northern Ireland</u> Unionist x 2 Nationalist x 1	East Anglia x 3 West Sussex/Brighton x 3 Reading/Newbury x 3 Leeds/York x 4 Fife/Stirling x 6 Bridgend/Cardiff x 3 County Down x 3

NB. 5 interviews focused in greater detail on the role of non-news genres

Sample structure for Stage 2: focus groups

Stage 2: 12 x News and Factual Focus Groups						
Socio-economic group	Age group	Topic interest & understanding	BBC/BBC News relationship	Political leanings	Locations	Group type*
ABC1 x1 BC1 x 3 C1C2 x 4 C2D x 4	18-24 x 2 25-34 x 2 35-44 x 2 45-54 x 2 55-75 x 3	High x 3 Medium x 6 Low x 3	Heavy x 4 Medium x 4 Light x 4	<u>England & Wales</u> Conservative x 4 Labour x 2 Lab/Lib x 1 <u>Scotland</u> No Scottish Independence x 1 Yes Scottish Independence x 2 <u>Northern Ireland</u> Nationalist x 1 Unionist x 1	Stockton West Devon Gillingham London Kingston Enniskillen Belfast Glasgow Dumfries Dundee Rhyl/Wrexham Newport	Informed x 6 Instinctive x 6
Stage 2: 4 x Other Genres Focus Groups						
Socio-economic group	Age group	Topic interest & understanding	BBC/BBC News relationship	Political leanings	Locations	Group type*
ABC1 x 2 C1C2 x 1 C2D x 1	25-34 x 1 35-44 x 1 45-54 x 1 55-75 x 1	High x 1 Medium x 2 Low x 1	Heavy x1 Medium x 1 Light x 2	<u>England</u> Labour x 2 Conservative x 1 <u>Scotland</u> No Scottish x 1	Warrington Birmingham Nottinghamshire Elgin	Informed x 2 Instinctive x 2

NB. Mix of genders in each group

*Half of the focus groups were 'Informed', meaning that during the groups, they were introduced to a definition of due impartiality based on the BBC's editorial guidelines for them to consider when reviewing output. The other focus groups were not introduced to the due impartiality definition and are referred to as 'Instinctive' as they were asked to use their own instinctive definition of impartiality when reviewing output

Sample structure for Stage 2: Gaelic and Welsh-speaking depth interviews

Stage 2: 12 x Gaelic and Welsh-speaking Depth Interviews					
Socio-economic group	Gender	Age	Topic interest & understanding	BBC/BBC News relationship	Locations
<u>Welsh</u> BC1 x 4 C2D x 2	<u>Welsh</u> Male x 2 Female x 4	<u>Welsh</u> 25-50 x 4 50-75 x 2	<u>Welsh</u> High x 1 Medium x 3 Low x 2	<u>Welsh</u> Heavy x 1 Medium x 5	<u>Wales (Welsh)</u> North Wales x 3 South Wales x 3
<u>Gaelic</u> BC1 x 5 C2D x 1	<u>Gaelic</u> Male x 3 Female x 3	<u>Gaelic</u> 25-50 x 4 50-75 x 2	<u>Gaelic</u> High x 2 Medium x 3 Low x 1	<u>Gaelic</u> Heavy x 2 Medium x 4	<u>Scotland (Gaelic)</u> Central Belt x 3 Western Isles x 3

NB. Owing to challenges in recruitment of Welsh and Gaelic speakers, a mix of ages, gender and levels of interest and understanding in the topics in scope were prioritised as recruitment criteria, with more flexibility allowed for political leanings.