

The rise and fall of perceived bias at the BBC

We should look to psychology not content analysis to understand allegations of political partiality.

[By Peter Ayton and Howard Tumber](#)

Has New Labour solved a chronic problem for the BBC? Since Tony Blair's first election victory in 1997 the public's perceptions of political bias at the BBC have undergone a dramatic change.

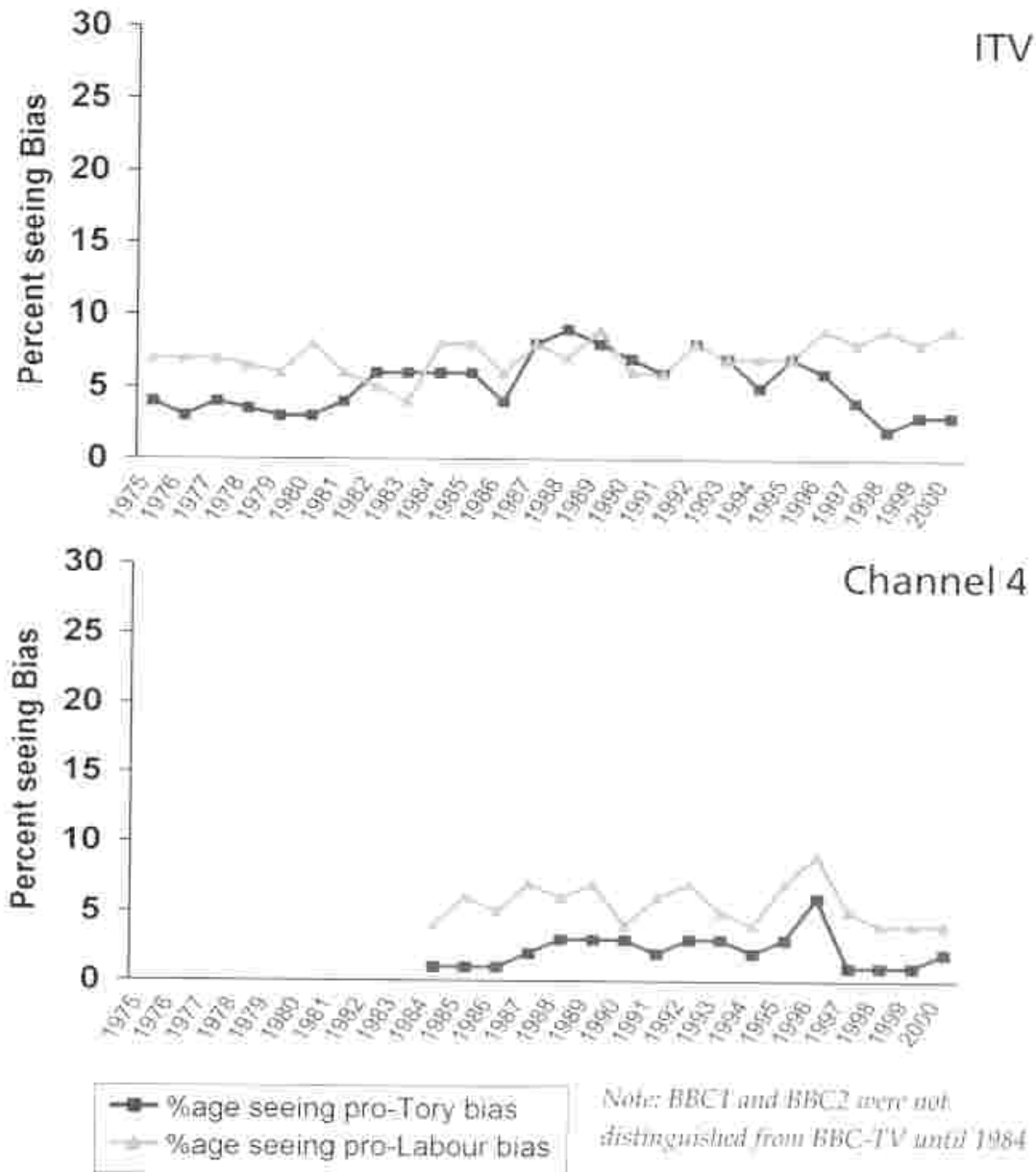
Accusations of political bias at the BBC have a long history. The BBC written archives reveal that from the very earliest days of the BBC politicians have been complaining of political bias. Throughout the years Conservatives have regularly complained of left wing bias, while complaints from the left of unbalanced coverage have been rarer. However, a frequently overlooked and under-reported fact is that audience research regularly reports that the general public see it quite differently.

The Independent Television Commission (and formerly the Independent Broadcasting Authority) conducts an annual survey of audience attitudes to television. Since 1975 this survey has reported on viewers' perceptions of political bias on different channels. It has consistently found that the BBC is seen as biased to the right by more than see it as biased to the left.

Respondents are asked whether they think each of the channels tend to favour any political party. While most people evidently do not consider the BBC to be politically biased, of those that do, substantially more people believe that the BBC is biased in favour of the Conservatives than believe it is in favour of Labour - or the Liberal Democrats.

Whilst the numbers seeing pro-Conservative bias grew substantially during the Thatcher years, the same predominantly pro-Conservative pattern has consistently been found ever since these annual surveys were started in 1975 when Labour was in office. (See below) Thus one suggestion, that the public simply feel that the BBC is biased in favour of the government of the day, does not explain the findings. A study carried out when perceptions of BBC bias were at their peak (Svennevig, 1989) showed that randomly sampled Conservative voters tend to agree with Labour voters that BBC television is more often pro-Conservative than pro-Labour, albeit to a lesser extent. Subjective perceptions of bias do not prove that the programmes are biased; nonetheless even the perceived bias revealed in the surveys is a serious problem for any news organisation (particularly the BBC) claiming to be authoritative and impartial. That this is an avoidable problem for some

broadcasting organisations is demonstrated by the same surveys showing far fewer people perceive any political bias on ITV and Channel 4.

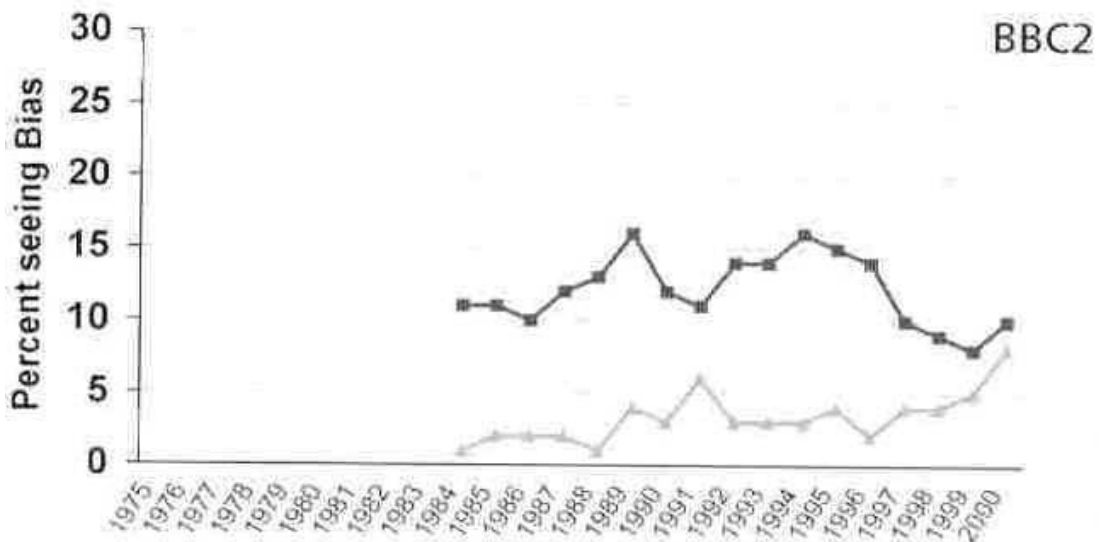
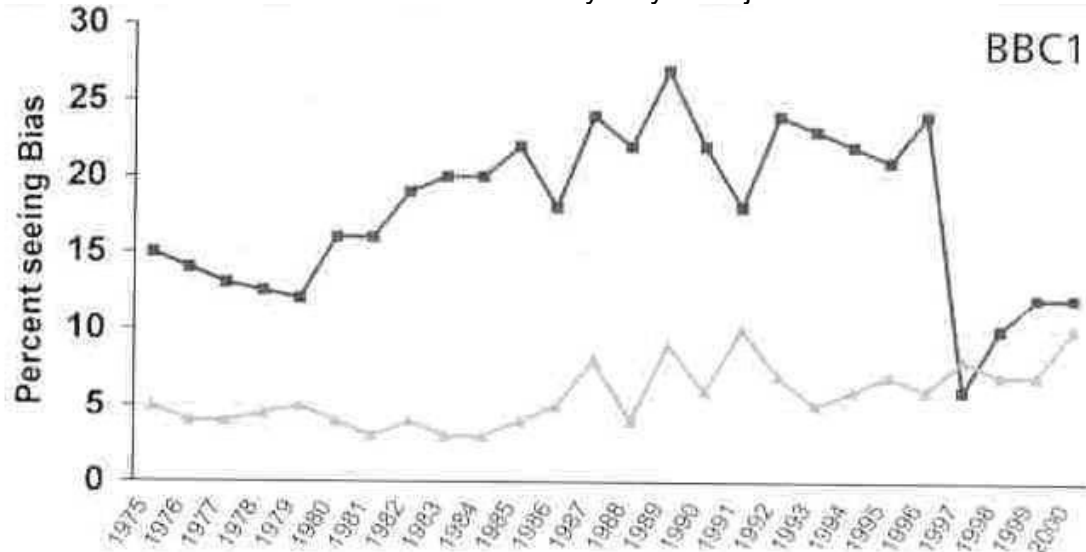


A new mood

Over recent years the survey reveals some fairly dramatic changes. The percentage perceiving a pro-Conservative bias on the BBC has dramatically declined. Most notably, in 1997, for the first time since the survey began in 1975 (and so including the last period of Labour government), more people perceived that BBC-1 had a pro-Labour bias (8%) than a pro-Conservative bias (6%). The poll was conducted in late 1997 just after New Labour's first election victory. [Note that, in the surveys, BBC-1 and BBC-2 weren't distinguished from "BBC-TV" until 1984].

While the numbers seeing a pro-Labour bias on the BBC have been higher in the past (10% in 1991) the numbers seeing pro-Conservative bias have never

been as low as they were in 1997. Since then the perception of pro-Conservative bias has crept up a little and is now again higher than those seeing a pro-Labour bias - 12% versus 8% in 1999 - but is still lower than during any other period of government on record. However the gap between the percentage of those seeing pro-Labour bias and those seeing pro-Conservative bias on BBC-1 is still historically very low - just 5%.



Note: BBC1 and BBC2 were not distinguished from BBC-TV until 1984

What accounts for these shifts in public perceptions of the impartiality of broadcasting? It seems quite implausible that the nature of the coverage of political issues on the BBC changed to any substantial extent between 1996 and 1997. It is much more likely that the changes in the perceptions of bias are due to more psychological factors rather than any intuitive content analysis of the impartiality of the journalistic output of the channels by viewers.

How do perceptions of bias arise?

In reviewing the available evidence Berry (1990) found that comprehension of news is often rather poor; viewers usually register news stories in an

incomplete and highly selective fashion, strongly influenced by their prevailing attitudes. For example, studies show that those supportive of the miners, during the strikes of the 1980s in the UK, were more likely to recall (correctly) that cameras were filming scuffles from behind police lines rather than between police and pickets. Moreover, people sympathetic to trade unions are more likely to recall points that were made in their favour.

Thus, although different people may view the same broadcasts they won't necessarily view them in the same way. Such findings suggest that viewer perceptions of bias can be rather self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating. Given that news comprehension is affected by message structure, Berry argued that it should be possible to structure broadcasts in ways that prevent such divergent views arising and suggested that Channel 4's better reputation for impartiality arises from the more in-depth nature of its news coverage.

There is also evidence that viewers can be sensitive to very subtle aspects of bias in broadcasts. A study (Mullen et al 19867) in the USA of coverage of the 1984 Reagan-Mondale election found that (unlike CBS or NBC) the ABC main newscaster tended to give more positive facial expressions when referring to Reagan than when referring to Mondale, although analyses of the content of the news found that it was, if anything, biased against Reagan. The study found that regular viewers of ABC news were more likely, than viewers of CBS or NBC, to vote for Reagan, suggesting that a smile can elect a President.

The 'establishment' broadcaster

These accounts, however, cannot convincingly explain why the BBC has had a far worse reputation for impartiality than ITV and why recently this has so dramatically improved. One likely cause of the BBC's problem seems to be its corporate image. The evidence suggests that perception of the BBC's output is affected not so much by the quality of its journalism but by its 'establishment' reputation. Unlike the more federal regional structure of ITV, the BBC has long exhibited a more monolithic 'Oxbridge' image. Morrison (1986) found that of those viewers seeing the BBC as unlikely to criticize the (Conservative) government, 27% thought it was due to pro-Conservative sympathies but 41% attributed it to the government's control of the license fee.

Paradoxically, it appears that such a connection to government can also aid a reputation for impartiality. One study published by the BBC's own Broadcasting Research Department (McGregor, 1987), surveyed viewer perceptions of BBC bias shortly before and after Norman Tebbit's prominent 1986 accusations of BBC bias over the coverage of the damage caused by American bombing raids on Tripoli. These criticisms, showed that government attacks seemed to have the effect of markedly *reducing* the numbers of people who think the BBC is biased to the right from 22% to 12%, while the numbers believing it biased to the left remained constant. At the same time the proportion of viewers believing ITV was biased to the right leapt from 6% before Tebbit's criticisms to 12% - the same as the BBC - afterwards.

Presumably any viewers entertaining a naïve conspiracy theory that the BBC's news is written in a smoke filled room by a Conservative establishment would find it hard to sustain this idea when there was a very public conflict between a prominent Conservative and the corporation. Quite possibly the

fact that ITV's news escaped the same Conservative condemnation explains its simultaneous momentary reputation for right wing bias.

It seems likely that the defeat of Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, in the 1997 election may have produced a similar influence on viewer perceptions of BBC impartiality. If Labour won then how could a Conservative BBC be in control of the public's voting intentions? Similarly the noticeable decline in perceptions of Conservative bias following the departure of Margaret Thatcher and its sudden upsurge following the re-election of John Major in 1992 can be attributed to the wavering of public perceptions of establishment control.

Pressure on the BBC

Perceptions of establishment influence are not always without some justification. During the 1926 general strike, Winston Churchill wanted the government to commandeer the BBC. The Conservative cabinet decided against this but John Reith, the first director general of the corporation, commented in his diary:

"They want to be able to say that they did not commandeer us, but they know they can trust us not to be really impartial." (Stuart 1975: 96)

Although pressure from politicians is always strenuously denied, our research of the BBC's own written archives indicate that, in the past at least, the BBC could be influenced by politicians' complaints. In December 1941 BBC Director General, Frederick Ogilvie, wrote a confidential memorandum to controllers regarding Conservative complaints that the BBC was biased to the left:

"The recurring allegation that the BBC is unduly leftward in its choice of speakers and programmes has recently taken on a new virulence. Without enquiring into statistical details I am clear that this charge has some foundation... Will controllers (take) early steps to correct the balance..."

In 1942 BBC Director General Sir Cecil Graves wrote a confidential memorandum to controllers:

"There is a good deal of Parliamentary activity, notably the 1922 committee, about the BBC being all left. This is of course a hardy annual but cannot be disregarded. ...until the matter is cleared up I should be grateful if you would keep off leftist speakers as much as possible"

Our examination of the BBC's written archives show that from the very earliest days of the BBC - when it was called the British Broadcasting Company - there have been accusations of political bias. In 1924 Oswald Mosley was a Labour candidate standing against Chamberlain and wrote to complain that he was unable to receive parity of treatment with Neville Chamberlain - the BBC announced Chamberlain's meetings but would not announce Mosley's. Mosley's letter observes that the BBC's agent concluded a sharp discussion with the observation: "I have never believed in Labour and never shall."

Conservative complaints

From our research in the BBC's own written archives we have found that the BBC's own archive is full of examples of accusations of bias from Conservatives.

In the early days it seemed that there was confusion about just what it was the BBC should and shouldn't do. At first any mention of politics or controversial

subjects was forbidden except in the context of news. The concept of impartiality was evidently difficult for complainers to grasp with protests that the BBC's news reports about their party showed it in a bad light - even if it was factually correct. No doubt people were rather unfamiliar with broadcasting as a new medium - let alone a service that claimed to be impartial. Reith more than once pointed out to complainants that some of what they objected to was simply news.

However it was not just the public who were naïve about impartiality. It would be unthinkable nowadays to imagine the BBC's Director General helping the Prime Minister to write his campaign broadcasts - but it happened. Reith's diaries record that, in April 1929, as the BBC's Director General, he dictated three or four minutes of Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin's broadcast address for the election (which he subsequently lost). Meanwhile Lloyd-George, the Liberal party leader was furious with the BBC for not allocating him a broadcasting date in the same week as they had for Baldwin and the Labour leader, Ramsay MacDonald. (Stuart, 1975: 96)

From 1925 Conservatives wrote to complain that the BBC had "Socialist leanings".

In 1928, for example the Conservative party chairman admonished the BBC about a series of talks entitled "Has farming a future?" which they claimed were presented by an "extreme Socialist". He added that he could not see what could be done unless "perhaps you can agree to a similar series of talks given by an expert who holds views diametrically opposed to those..."

Following an investigation Reith apologised for the talks and said he was unlikely to use the speaker again.

In March 1928 the BBC was empowered to broadcast speeches and statements of political controversy "*on the understanding that such broadcast material shall be distributed with scrupulousness fairness*". [Postmaster General to parliament. The Ullswater committee was set up to investigate if this condition had been met and reported favourably.]

However Conservative complaints continued. In 1931 Lord Henry Scott wrote to Lord Stonehaven asking that "...something be done to mitigate the perpetual anti-Conservative policy of the BBC". He claimed that 75% or more of the speakers are anti-Conservative:

"I include addresses by Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Harold Nicholson, Vernon Bartlett, Compton Mackenzie and Ponsonby - all these intellectual highbrows."

The BBC response

Stonehaven sent the letter to Reith who replied in rather exasperated tones that it was difficult to understand how anyone could have written such a letter. "*In the words of a strong Conservative member of staff here, it is the sort of thing that makes a Conservative ashamed of his party*". Reith pointed out that the speakers complained about had not spoken on political topics and argued: "*Does it really come to this that a man's political views should be taken into account when he is giving a talk on, say, beetles?*"

In 1937 the Daily Mail opened up a campaign against what it termed "the menace of red bias on the radio" In a leader on Jan 13th it asked: *Who is responsible for the conspicuous and persistent pro-red bias, given to the BBC's service of News bulletins dealing with the Spanish civil war?* On Feb 10th an article claimed that: *"the corporation is now spreading Soviet propaganda through its curriculum to schools"*

A Spanish general, broadcasting from Seville, said that the reason why the BBC continued to report Government success was that its announcers were bribed. In response to this accusation the BBC's senior announcer, Stuart Hibberd stated that he had never been approached with a bribe and that the nearest to it was when he was sent a box of haddock by a fisherman grateful for the gale warning that he had broadcast.

Wartime allegations

Pressure on the BBC, particularly in times of national crisis, has continued to the present day. Attacks on its impartiality were evident at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956 when, for instance, Peter Rawlinson, a Conservative MP complained in Parliament 'on the time given to one side, upon matters of emphasis, of selection, of nuance, use of adjective and the use of tone'. These, he maintained added up to 'a slant on the news', (The Times, November 15 1956, p.4). Similar attacks were repeated in 1982 during the Falklands conflict. The BBC came under considerable flak from the Government, Conservative MPs and sections of the national press for their supposedly unpatriotic coverage at a time when questions began to form over the problems that could arise should a long campaign develop. (Morrison & Tumber, 1988) Similar assaults exhibited by the Government towards the BBC during the Falklands bore a striking similarity to the challenges made to the corporation (and to other broadcasters) over news and current affairs programmes about Northern Ireland.(see Rolston & Miller (eds), 1996) Criticisms by government ministers were also raised about the BBC's coverage of the Gulf and the Balkans.

Management and public opinion

One possible explanation for the recent narrowing of the gap in perceptions of pro Conservative bias and pro Labour bias by the BBC is the press coverage given to the relationship between the Labour party and the corporation. In particular, the appointment of Greg Dyke as director general of the BBC who had previously donated £50,000 to Tony Blair's campaign for the Labour leadership, the peerage awarded, by Tony Blair, to John Birt, Dyke's predecessor as Director General and the interchange of personnel between Downing street and the BBC has led to suggestions that the BBC is "soft" on Labour.

While editors and journalists working in BBC News and Current Affairs are charged with the responsibility of achieving impartiality it seems that actions by their senior managers and the governors strongly influence the public's perception of their work. Perceived bias of BBC bias is a complex phenomenon that seems to be influenced by journalism, psychology and the nature of the relationship real and imagined - between broadcasters and politics.

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