

Institution: Loughborough University
Unit of Assessment: D36b Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
Title of case study: Improving the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of the Middle East and North Africa
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The Loughborough Communication Research Centre at Loughborough University has been instrumental in improving the impartiality of BBC news and current affairs coverage of events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Centre was commissioned by the BBC Board of Governors (and its successor body, the BBC Trust) to assess its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in 2006) and of the Arab Spring (in 2011). The analyses of BBC output led to demonstrable, on-going and significant changes in the BBC's way of providing impartial coverage of these conflicts. The reports have also precipitated considerable media debate in the UK and internationally indicating the significance and reach of our research.</p> <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The Loughborough Communication Research Centre (LCRC) has established a world-leading reputation in both academia and newspaper and broadcasting industries for conducting large-scale, high-profile and exceptionally rigorous analysis in 'real-time' [3.1]. The expertise of the LCRC has been extended, both methodologically and empirically, since 2000 to include comparative analysis of international news and current affairs generally and MENA in particular (with the appointments of Professor John Downey (2000-present), Dr John Richardson (2012-present) and Dr James Staney (2005-present) [3.2, 3.3, 3.4].</p> <p>Review of Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 2006</p> <p>In 2005 the LCRC (Professor Peter Golding (1990-2010), Professor David Deacon (1990-present), Downey, Richardson, Dr Dominic Wring (1997-present)) was approached by the BBC's Board of Governors to tender for a content analysis of the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by distance the most controversial aspect of the BBC's output both domestically and internationally. The LCRC's bid was judged to be 'outstandingly the best' by the BBC Governors' selection panel (4 universities submitted a tender).</p> <p>The results of the content analysis were rigorously reviewed by a panel of 5 experts (including eminent journalists and academics such as Professor Stewart Purvis), by the BBC Board of Governors, and by the BBC Executive (including Malcolm Balen, Senior Editorial Advisor to the Director of BBC News). The report is published on the BBC Trust website and was also subject to considerable media scrutiny and debate in the UK and internationally [3.5].</p> <p>Findings</p> <p>The results confounded media industry and political elite perceptions that the BBC is generally pro-Palestinian in its accounts of events. The major conclusions of the 25,000 word report were that while there was an ostensible balance in the representation of Israeli and Palestinian political elites, coverage lacked historical context, was inconsistent in the extent of coverage, and that there was imbalance in the reporting of fatalities and casualties.</p> <p>Review of Coverage of the Arab Spring 2012</p> <p>In 2011 the LCRC (Deacon, Downey, Staney, Wring) was approached by the BBC Trust to tender for a content analysis of coverage of the events known as the Arab Spring. For the first time the analysis included BBC international broadcasts (BBC World) and an international broadcaster, Al Jazeera English, as well as domestic competitors to the BBC.</p> <p>The report was rigorously reviewed by an independent expert (Edward Mortimer, former Director of Communication for the UN General Secretary Kofi Annan), a consultant employed by the BBC</p>

Trust (Kam Atwal), BBC Trust's Head of Editorial Standards (Fran O'Brien), and the BBC Executive (most notably Malcolm Balen, Senior Editorial Advisor to Helen Boaden, formerly Director of BBC News).

Findings

The major conclusions, presented initially orally to the BBC Trust and subsequently in a 20,000 word written report, were: there was a considerable change in the character of reporting over time: initial absence of coverage followed by inattention and incredulity by experts interviewed by the BBC giving way to reporting of the exhilaration and euphoria of Spring 'revolutions' to be in turn surpassed by an exploration of the ambiguity and ambivalence of events in the Autumn and beyond; there was substantial geographical variation in coverage of North African and Gulf State conflicts; there was a predominance of reporting of Western political actors in contrast to Russian and Chinese elites; that user-generated content (UGC) tended to be used without caveats; and that there was scant provision of historical context in broadcast output with little reference made to more extensive coverage available on the BBC website [3.6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1. Deacon, D. (2007)** Yesterday's Papers and Today's Technology: Digital Newspaper Archives and 'Push Button' Content analysis, *European Journal of Communication*, 22(1), 5-25, ISSN: 0267-3231. DOI: 10.1177/0267323107073743

European Journal of Communication has an impact factor of 1.050 and is ranked 24/72 in Communication

- 3.2. Downey, J. and Stanyer, J. (2010)** Comparative media analysis: Why some fuzzy thinking might help. Applying fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis to the personalization of mediated political communication, *European Journal of Communication* 25(4), 331-347, DOI: 10.1177/0267323110384256

This article won the award for the best article of the year in *European Journal of Communication* in 2010. European Journal of Communication has an impact factor of 1.050 and is ranked 24/72 in Communication

- 3.3. Downey, J. (2006)** Surveillance from below? The Electronic Intifada. In Sarikakis, KE and Thussu, D (ed), *Ideologies of the Internet*, Hampton Press, pp.147-162, ISBN: 9781572735972

- 3.4. Richardson, J and Barkho, L (2009)** Reporting Israel/Palestine Ethnographic insights into the verbal and visual rhetoric of BBC journalism, *Journalism Studies*, 10(5), 594-622, ISSN: 1461-670X. DOI: 10.1080/14616700802653057

Journalism Studies has an impact factor of 0.536 and is ranked 49/72 in Communication:

- 3.5. Downey, J., Deacon, D., Golding, P., Richardson, J., Wring, D. (2006)** The BBC's Reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict August 1 2005 – January 31 2006, 1-105 http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/govs/loughborough_final.pdf

This report for the BBC Board of Governors was rigorously reviewed by an independent panel of 5 experts, BBC Governors Editorial Standards Committee, and the BBC Executive. It is published on the BBC Trust website and has been subject to considerable media scrutiny and debate internationally. It has been cited 9 times in academic journal articles

- 3.6. Downey, J., Deacon, D., Stanyer, J., Wring, D. (2012)** A BBC Trust report on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the "Arab Spring": Content Analysis, 1-91 http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/arabspring_impartiality/appendix_a.pdf

This report was rigorously reviewed by independent expert Edward Mortimer, Fran O'Brien (Head of Editorial Standards for the BBC Trust), additional consultants employed by the BBC Trust, Malcolm Balen (special editorial advisor to Helen Boaden, formerly Director of BBC News), and the BBC Executive. It is published on the BBC Trust website and was subject to

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media scrutiny internationally.

Grants

£50,320 Golding, P., Downey, J., Deacon, D. & Wring, D. (2005-6) Content Analysis of BBC Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, BBC Board of Governors.

£73,562 Downey, J., Deacon, D., Stanyer, J. & Wring, D. (2011-2) Impartiality & Accuracy review of the BBC's coverage of conflict, in particular the Arab Spring, BBC Trust

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Loughborough Communication Research Centre research has had an impact both on the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab Spring and the media debate about how these conflicts are reported by media institutions.

Review of the Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Impact 1: Improving the impartiality of the BBC's coverage

Sir Quentin Thomas (then President of the British Board of Film Classification and previously Political Director in the Northern Ireland Office and at one time civil servant in the Home Office responsible for broadcasting policy) was chair of a 5 member panel conducting, on behalf of the BBC Governors, the 2006 Impartiality Review of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Panel found the LCRC report very helpful and the Thomas report was informed by it in making its four main recommendations: 'the BBC should provide more consistently a full and fair account'; 'the BBC should provide an editorial 'Guiding Hand''; 'the BBC should get the language [of the conflict] right'; and 'the BBC should make purposive and not merely reactive efforts to explain the complexities of the conflict' [5.1, Chairman of panel; 5.2, member of panel].

In response to the report the BBC Executive proposed an 'enhanced role for our Middle East editor [Jeremy Bowen] in helping to formulate...overall coverage strategy'; the appointment of a West Bank correspondent; the development of an approved lexicon of the conflict for use by journalists and made partially available to the public; and to commission a new website that will provide background and context to the conflict. These proposed changes were accepted by the BBC Governors and subsequently implemented by the BBC. These changes to BBC structures and practices in Middle East reporting are still in place in 2014.

Impact 2: Contributing to public debate about media coverage of the conflict

Coming on the heels of the Hutton Inquiry the review based on the research cited in section 2 aroused considerable attention internationally in public spheres as a subject for news and comment (as well as coverage in the 'quality' and mid-market UK national newspapers it was reported on, amongst others, in The Economist, The Jerusalem Post, The Washington Post, The Australian, The Irish Times). Two headlines capture the aftermath of the report. In The Economist 'the BBC shrugs off criticism of its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict' (22/6/2006) and Martin Walker in The Times 'The BBC pro-Israeli? Is the Pope Jewish?' (11/5/2006). Clearly the review challenged dominant perceptions of BBC coverage both within the BBC and within the industry more generally and continues to affect media debate about the BBC's reporting of the conflict (for example, Jonny Paul's article about the BBC's reporting of Israel in The Jerusalem Post (16/4/2009)). [5.5, 5.6, 5.7].

Review of the Coverage of the 'Arab Spring'

Impact 1: Improving the impartiality of the BBC's coverage

In 2011 the Trust appointed Edward Mortimer (former Times and FT leader writer, highly-respected expert in the field, and former Director of Communications to Kofi Annan while he was General Secretary of the United Nations) to review the BBC's coverage of the Arab Spring...his report drew substantially on LCRC findings [5.3, independent expert appointed by BBC Trust; 5.4, BBC Trust Head of Editorial Standards].

As a result of the research as cited in section 2, the BBC Trust concluded (after taking into account the BBC Executive response) that: 1. 'The BBC's coverage of this series of events was generally

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impartial. There were, however, points where coverage could have been fuller in various geographical areas at different times. Some countries had little coverage, others could have been followed up more fully and there could have been fuller examination of the different voices which made up the opposition to various incumbent governments. In addition a broader range of international reaction could have been covered.' 2. 'The Trust welcomes the Executive's recognition that the BBC could have made better use of references to the website within broadcast items for those interested in more information or background, and encourages its use in particular on those outlets which attract younger audiences.' and 3. 'In order to safeguard audiences' trust, the BBC should consider how it might better share more effectively with the audience the rigorous vetting process to which all User Generated Content (UGC) is subjected.' The BBC's Director of News updated the Trust on progress made in implementing changes to structure and output in summer 2013.

Impact 2: Contributing to public debate about media coverage of the 'Arab Spring'

The public reception of the Arab Spring impartiality was less heated than the 2006 review. The findings were reported on widely in the UK 'quality' and mid-market newspapers and in industry journals such as Broadcast and The Hollywood Reporter. Most of the press reaction focused on the use of User Generated Content and the lack of background and context, issues brought to light by LCRC's content analysis (for instance, see Ben McDowell's Guardian article referencing the LCRC research on 22/6/2012) [5.8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

The following sources of corroboration can be made available at request:

- 5.1. Chair of the Board of Governors Independent Panel of Experts on the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- 5.2. Member of the Board of Governors Independent Panel of Experts on the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- 5.3. Independent Expert appointed by the BBC Trust to review the BBC's coverage of the 'Arab Spring'
- 5.4. Head of Editorial Standards, BBC Trust
- 5.5. The Economist 'The BBC: Walking the Line' 22/6/2006
<http://www.economist.com/node/7086836>
- 5.6. Martin Walker 'The BBC pro-Israeli? Is the Pope Jewish?' The Times (11/5/2006)
- 5.7. Jonny Paul 'BBC watchdog partially upholds complaints of inaccurate reporting on Israel by Middle East editor' The Jerusalem Post (16/4/2009)
- 5.8. Ben McDowell 'BBC considers labelling user-generated content used in news items' (22/6/2012) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/jun/26/bbc-warn-user-content>