



CAMPAIGN^{FOR}
COMMON
SENSE

Partial to Some Performative Drama: The BBC and Bias

About Us

The Campaign for Common Sense (CCS) exists to bring together those who want to have grown up discussion and debate.

We will conduct research, and organise events online and across the country, involving experts in all fields and bring them to the widest possible audience.

We will be champions for free speech and tolerance.

We believe that...

...nobody has a monopoly on what is right and wrong.

...we all have far more in common than it sometimes seems.

...common sense and fair play are the best way to approach controversial Issues.

...sensitive topics should be discussed frankly & calmly, without trading insults.

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Introduction

The BBC plays a unique role in British society, and is still largely regarded as a cultural national treasure by many of us who pay the licence fee. As such, it places great emphasis on its commitment to being unbiased in its programming. In its own words, “The BBC is committed to achieving due impartiality in all its output. This commitment is fundamental to our reputation, our values and the trust of audiences.”

This not only applies to its news and current events shows, but to all content aired on its various media channels, with impartiality specifically defined as “[involving] more than a simple matter of ‘balance’ between opposing viewpoints. We must be inclusive, considering the broad perspective and ensuring that the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected.”

In December 2020 we published ‘A Barrel of Laughs’, an analysis of BBC left-wing bias in its comedy output. Amongst our findings was that 74% of all comedy slots during the time period in question were given to comedians with publicly pronounced left-leaning tendencies, and just 2 of the 141 comedians featured by the BBC were explicitly conservative, pro-Brexit or anti-‘woke’.

To gain a fuller understanding of the state of impartiality at the corporation, we decided to run a similar exercise for BBC drama. In apparent contradiction of its own

stated values, the BBC appears to lean only one way when it comes to how it presents a variety of political issues in its dramatic output. On a range of subjects depicted in BBC shows such as 'The Trick', 'The Capture', and 'Sherwood', for example, a discernible left-wing bias can be detected, with distinctly anti-Conservative and anti-institution sentiments appearing frequently in its programming.

That is not to say that left-wing views are illegitimate, or should not be aired. Quite the contrary. We are simply noticing that there is no balance in its output. The BBC should be presenting diverse perspectives, including both left- and right-wing views; our issue is that opposing ideas are not represented fairly or consistently, which isolates many viewers and falls short of the corporation's own commitments to impartiality.

Methodology

The exercise

Our team identified a comprehensive selection of BBC-commissioned dramas, which aired mostly over the course of 2022. This included **70 episodes** of dramatic output, and involved watching over **60 hours** of BBC programming. Each incidence of impartiality was logged and broadly categorised (see below for the categories we included), and a final 'bias score' was arrived at. The assessment was designed to be as objective as possible, looking forensically at content, including dialogue, messaging and casting.

Programme selection

Programmes included BBC dramas 'The Capture', 'Vigil' and 'Sherwood', amongst others, which were aired between Autumn 2021 and Autumn 2022. The programmes were selected as they were produced specifically for the BBC, so we did not include dramas from overseas. We also limited the content to contemporary productions, so period dramas, for example, were excluded from the exercise.

Bias Scale

The aim of the exercise was to test the widely-held perception that the BBC skews towards the left politically, and consistently portrays one-sided attitudes to Britain, its

institutions and to political decisions such as Brexit. An exercise such as this is always going to include a more significant qualitative element than it will a quantitative one, however we wanted the analysis to be assessable for similar analyses in the future, which is why we used the 'bias scale', attributing a rating from one to five depending on the content and tone of each individual programme. We intend to use this scale to assess future programming when the question of impartiality arises.

Summary

The BBC is falling short in its commitment to impartiality. Our findings show that there is still work to do, both relating to the content of individual programmes themselves, and in the balance of programming in general. Whilst many of the programmes we surveyed had a distinct left-wing bias, there were no dramas reflecting a conservative, pro-Brexit or right-wing bent. Many of the themes covered in its dramatic programming were presented in a blatantly one-sided way, when in fact there is ongoing debate around the issue. In 'The Trick', for example, the idea that humanity has only ten years in which to avoid climate collapse is presented in a narration to the viewer as settled science, when in fact the finer details of climate change and the timeline for its expected effects are still somewhat disputed. Indeed, the programme makes no effort to hide its position on this issue, with one Independent reviewer observing, "the script constantly struggles to balance the desire to lay out what happened with a desire to wallop us over the head with its environmental message. Characters break the fourth wall to lecture us about the long-term impact of rising temperatures." In another example, BBC drama 'Vigil' is unreservedly pro-nuclear disarmament, with one character telling the viewer, "we have no viable deterrent if it can be infiltrated by a foreign power. There's no way our government can claim that these weapons are safe and secure. It's time to get the nukes out of Scotland." Indeed, the show was advised by Feargal Dalton, a CND

campaigner and SNP councillor, who has previously said, “nuclear weapons are despicable.”

In researching the themes for this exercise, we divided them into the following broad categories:

- Mistrust in institutions
- Anti-Conservative Party sentiment
- Anti-Brexit sentiment
- Exaggerating societal disharmony
- Pro-trade union
- Misrepresented demographics
- Anti-police
- Anti-military
- Anti-corporate/capitalist
- Tunnel-visioned on climate change
- Anti-nuclear

Our findings:

- We assessed **60+ hours** of BBC drama output
- We limited the content to BBC-specific productions, narrowing the selection to **70 episodes** across **16** programmes

- **None** of the content surveyed was sympathetic towards, or fairly presented, what would generally be considered small-c conservative or right-wing views
- Almost **40%** of the dramas in the time period were given a 4- or 5- star bias rating, indicating strong bias, often applicable to multiple categories
- Those with low bias ratings were largely apolitical; when the programmes did include a political angle, it invariably skewed towards the left

Recommendations

1. Scriptwriters and programme-makers should be reminded of the need for diversity of opinion in plot lines when producing dramas
2. The BBC Editorial team should write to scriptwriters, programme-makers and commissioners to remind them of their commitment - that storylines should not all point in the same direction politically
3. BBC should conduct its own review to ensure its processes are fit for purpose when it comes to delivering drama that represents the diversity of opinion that exists in the country

Appendix

A selection of the programmes analysed:

PROGRAMME	BIAS RATING
The Capture	5
The Trick	5
Vigil	5
Sherwood	4
Rules of the Game	4
The Responder	4
Industry	3
Eastenders	2
Inside Man	2
Crossfire	1