

# Impartiality

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This is particularly true with controversial issues. Here, particularly, journalists need to be accurate and impartial and keep their own opinions firmly under wraps. Impartiality means:

- providing a balance of issues and views
- reflecting a wide range of opinion
- exploring conflicting views
- ensuring no significant strand of thought is under represented.

In terms of editorial freedom, journalists should be free to:

- cover any subject if there are good editorial reasons for doing so
- report on a specific aspect of an issue
- provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed
- avoid bias or an imbalance of views
- cover stories that might offend part of the audience
- be fair with contributors and let them respond to our questions.

However, in doing so we need to be prepared to offer a right of reply. In seeking impartiality, we must never assume that academics, journalists and other contributors brought in to provide balance and comment are themselves impartial.

Impartiality must be adequate and appropriate. It is not necessary to represent every argument on every occasion or to offer an equal division of time for each view. Healthy editorial discussions with senior colleagues will help formulate this policy case by case. A journalist should not struggle alone.

Controversial subject might cover politics, religion, sexual practices, human relationships and financial dealings. In all cases, we must ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight.

We also need to ensure that opinion is clearly distinguished from fact. We might also need to ensure that all the main views are reflected in our output, even if we find some repulsive. We have a duty to inform the public debate regardless of our own personal points of view and preferences.

When our own media organisation becomes the story, perhaps bad financial news, a sacking, a drugs scandal, poor ratings, etc, we need to ensure that we are prepared to report on news affecting us as we would on news affecting others.

Sometimes it is not possible to provide balance and impartiality in a single item. It might be that a story is so one-sided that to try to offer balance and impartiality makes a mockery of the report. In such cases, we should aim to offer balance within the programme strand or in the next bulletin.

Personal views offering one side of a story can often add fresh public understanding of an issue and encourage healthy debate. This is especially true when the contribution enhances the understanding of the audience and opens their minds to fresh perspectives.

These can include the views of victims and those who feel they, or others, have been wronged. Such personal views can be highly partial. In such cases, it is important we signpost clearly to ensure the audience realises that the views being expressed offer one side only.

Again, it is then our responsibility to find a balancing point of view within the same programme strand or within the next bulletin. In all cases we must :

- retain a respect for factual accuracy
- fairly represent opposing viewpoints when appropriate
- provide an opportunity to reply
- ensure that a sufficiently broad range of views and perspectives is included
- ensure these are broadcast in similar output, measure and time of day.

With online debates we need to protect the audience from being led to believe that the views being discussed are endorsed by our media organisation. To do so we must:

- not endorse or support any personal views or campaigns
  - make a clear distinction between our content and that created by the audience
  - make clear what resources we are providing.
- Exercises
- Are there any cases where offering balance and impartiality in a single news item might make a mockery of our coverage?
  - How should journalists offer impartiality when there isn't another perspective available?

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This site has used the BBC's Editorial Guidelines as the basis for these short modules on values and ethics. We sought and were given permission to quote from the guidelines and to develop the themes to the extent that they are no longer an accurate reflection of the BBC's stance. These guidelines contain a mix of regional experiences and sensitivities which have been used to develop the guidelines and give them local relevance. These pages are not endorsed by the BBC.

MHM would like to thank the BBC for allowing us to use its material.