

A threat to impartiality: reconstructing and situating the BBC's denial of the 2009 DEC appeal for Gaza

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Abstract

In January 2009, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) denied a request from the Disaster's Emergency Committee (DEC) to broadcast an emergency appeal to relieve humanitarian suffering in Gaza in the wake of the Israeli ground offensive 'Cast Lead'. The decision marked the first time in the forty year relationship between the two organisations that a request was refused by the BBC, but an appeal went ahead. BBC Executives argued that airing the appeal could pose a threat to public confidence in the BBC's impartiality. This article, both descriptive and exploratory in scope, first reconstructs a chronology of this 'impartiality argument'. This reconstruction provides a detailed overview of the key players, the (historical) relationship between them, and of the run-up to and the aftermath of the BBC's decision. The second part of the article situates the BBC's denial of the DEC request. It explores how the BBC's concerns over impartiality articulate the Corporation's new 'wagon wheel' approach to impartiality, before it explores the BBC's decision and the – rekindled - centrality of impartiality within a context of the BBC being increasingly bound by the nature of its brand and the visibility of the Middle East conflict.

Key Words:

BBC; Middle East; impartiality; Disaster Emergency Committee; controversy.

Introduction

In January 2009, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) denied a request from the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) to broadcast an emergency appeal for relieving humanitarian suffering in Gaza after the Israeli ground offensive 'Cast Lead'. The BBC's decision marked the first time in the over forty year relationship between the BBC and DEC that a request was denied by the BBC, while the umbrella organisation of some of the UK's biggest charities proceeded with a campaign. In accounting for the decision, BBC Executives argued that airing the free-standing appeal could have impeded public confidence in the BBC's impartiality, particularly as the appeal concerned the humanitarian consequences of a 'major ongoing news story'. This line of argument is illustrated in Director-General Mark Thompson's contribution to the BBC's on-line 'Editor's blog',

Gaza remains a major ongoing news story, in which humanitarian issues - the suffering and distress of civilians and combatants on both sides of the conflict, the debate about who is responsible for causing it and what should be done about it - are both at the heart of the story and contentious. We have and will continue to cover the human side of the conflict in Gaza extensively across our news services where we can place all of the issues in context in an objective and balanced way. After looking at all of the circumstances, and in particular after seeking advice from senior leaders in BBC Journalism, we concluded that we could not broadcast a free-standing appeal, no matter how carefully constructed, without running the risk of reducing public confidence in the BBC's impartiality in its wider coverage of the story. (Thompson, 2009a)

Interestingly, the BBC assigning impartiality such a central role in denying the DEC appeal comes two years after the publication of an influential BBC report that was approved and adopted by the BBC Trust and BBC Executive Board in 2007. This 'From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel' report (British Broadcasting Corporation Trust, 2007) provides an analysis of and guidelines for reconciling the concept of impartiality with the requirements and characteristics of the 21st century. The report acknowledges the BBC's impartiality as increasingly distinct in a media landscape that is characterised by colour, tenet and partisanship, and also argues that (British) society has changed so much that audiences will no longer settle for the traditional 'seesaw' approach to impartiality, an

approach which Barnett (2010, pp.3) terms the ‘binary left versus right incarnation of the Cold War’.

This article, both descriptive and exploratory in scope, first reconstructs a chronology of the BBC’s ‘impartiality argument’ used by BBC Executives in accounting for the decision not to air the appeal for Gaza. This reconstruction seems long due given the exceptional nature of the BBC’s decision and the surprisingly very little academic analyses of the specific relationship between the BBC and the DEC (see Franks and Seaton, 2009, for an exception). This reconstruction of the controversy provides a detailed overview of the key players, the (historical) relationship between them, and of the run-up to and the aftermath of the BBC’s decision. The second part of the article situates the BBC’s denial of the DEC request firstly by exploring how the BBC’s concerns over impartiality indeed articulate a new ‘wagon wheel’ approach to impartiality. Next, we explore the BBC’s decision and the – rekindled - centrality of impartiality within a context of the BBC being increasingly bound by the nature of its brand and the visibility of the Middle East conflict.

Reconstructing the BBC’s denial of the DEC request

On December 27, 2008 the Israeli Defence Force began ‘Operation Cast Lead’, a full-scale military offensive that was presented as a response to an increased number of rocket attacks from Palestine (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2008). On January 11, 2009 the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) issued its fourth ‘Situation Report’ on the civilian casualties and infrastructural damage in Gaza incurred from the Israeli offensive. Using figures from the Palestinian Ministry of Health, it was reported that between 80,000 to 90,000 people – over half of whom were children – had been displaced, 884 Palestinians had died – 275 of whom were children – and 3,085 Palestinians had been injured including 1,333 children and 587 women (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2009). The report concluded with an overview of the ‘priority needs’ for the citizens of Gaza. Two days later, on January 13, 2009, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) made informal contact with the BBC concerning the potential of an emergency DEC Appeal for Gaza. This was followed by, six days later,

the submission of a formal request ultimately adjudicated by the decision of Mark Thompson, the BBC's Director General, arguing that airing the appeal would impair the BBC's impartiality (Thompson, 2009a). This section reconstructs the build-up to and aftermath of the BBC's decision. This 'chronology of the impartiality argument' firstly contextualises the BBC's long-standing relationship with the DEC. It then reconstructs the rise of the centrality of impartiality in the BBC's decision not to air the appeal, before outlining how this impartiality argument is further refined and reinforced in the media offensive that BBC Executives launched in response to public protest and complaints over the BBC's decision.

The BBC as part of the DEC's 'Rapid Response Network'

Founded in 1963, the Disasters Emergency Committee (henceforth DEC) is an umbrella organisation which provides a platform for prominent British humanitarian agencies to propose, initiate and conduct large-scale coordinated and highly visible domestic media campaigns to raise funds in support of specific international disaster relief appeals. DEC membership during the failed 2009 Gaza appeal consisted of the following charities: ActionAid; British Red Cross; CAFOD; Care International UK; Christian Aid; Concern Worldwide; Help the Aged; Islamic Relief; Merlin; Oxfam; Save the Children; Tearfund, and World Vision (Disasters Emergency Committee, 2008b). Appeals considered and undertaken by the DEC are limited to large-scale disasters requiring an amplified humanitarian effort and where DEC members are in a position to operate effectively. Appeals must satisfy three criteria,

1. The disaster must be on such a scale and of such urgency as to call for swift international humanitarian assistance.
2. The DEC agencies, or some of them, must be in a position to provide effective and swift humanitarian assistance at a scale to justify a national appeal.
3. There must be reasonable grounds for concluding that a public appeal would be successful, either because of evidence of existing public sympathy for the humanitarian situation or because there is a compelling case indicating the likelihood of significant public support should an appeal be launched. (Disasters Emergency Committee, 2008e)

Discussions around a potential appeal start with DEC members discussing between themselves the identified crisis against the backdrop of these appeal criteria. At the same time, the DEC may contact its network of partners and specifically its broadcast partners, most notably the BBC, about a potential appeal. The ‘Rapid Response Network’ (RRN) is the name given by the DEC to this ‘support network’ of broadcasters (TV and radio), the press and other institutions such as banks and the postal service who play a crucial role in helping raise both funds and the profile of the appeal (Disasters Emergency Committee, 2008d).

The BBC is a key member of the RRN. The relationship between the DEC and the BBC is entrenched in an ‘Aide-Memoire’ produced in 1971 which, while written in rather informal and procedural language, outlines the agreement between the two organisations (see: Thompson, 2009a). When considering an appeal, the DEC may informally approach the BBC. To formally request an appeal, the DEC must contact the BBC with a ‘Case for Support’ outlining how it believes the appeal criteria are met. Within the BBC, the final decision regarding the appeal rests with the BBC’s Editor-in-Chief: the Director General. An important difference between the DEC and the BBC is that whereas the DEC needs only satisfy the three criteria to launch an appeal, for the BBC,

to be satisfied that each of the three criteria is met is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for reaching a decision to broadcast an appeal. The BBC Executive must also be satisfied that to broadcast a proposed appeal would be consistent with the BBC’s obligations under the Charter and the Agreement. Compliance with those obligations is of *overriding importance* in everything that the BBC does. Additionally, the content of any individual appeal which is broadcast must comply with BBC Editorial Guidelines, as is the case for all the BBC’s output. (Thompson, 2009b, emphasis added)

The contextualisation of the DEC appeal process offered by Mark Thompson goes far beyond the flat text of the original aide-memoire. Yet, this more detailed articulation was born from a legal challenge by law firm Hickman & Rose concerning the BBC’s denial of the Gaza appeal. From this perspective, Thompson’s emphasis on the ‘overriding importance’ of maintaining the BBC’s impartiality – as extended through its Charter

obligations – may be read as reasserting the importance of maintaining impartiality in the practices of the BBC. This is discussed in more detail below.

It is also noteworthy that the DEC does not produce its own broadcast appeals (Thompson, 2009b). Therefore, when an appeal is approved by the BBC, producers from television and radio are appointed by the BBC to draft an appeal script based on the DEC's Case for Support. The script then undergoes internal clearance and is also subject to approval from the DEC. The presenter for the appeal is selected by the BBC. Traditionally, footage of the crisis taken from BBC news footage is also used for television appeals (Thompson, 2009b). The televised appeal is allocated a 'prime-time' slot often at the end of the BBC's major news broadcast and is also broadcast on other BBC platforms. This involvement of the BBC in helping to create the appeal content was flagged as problematic by BBC Executives in the context of the Gaza appeal.

Between 1999 and January 2009, the BBC has broadcast 15 DEC emergency appeals (Thompson, 2009b). Not captured in the number of appeals run by the DEC is the number of failed appeals; appeals proposed by the DEC but not developed into official campaigns. Limited documentation exists concerning past failed DEC appeals as such decisions are internal to the DEC and may be taken informally or at closed meetings. What is known is that the number of potential appeals discussed and debated by the DEC and the RRN is greater than the number of appeals actually run. A letter published by BBC Litigation states that, besides the Gaza appeal, two other DEC appeal requests have been declined by the BBC. The Guardian's website published an article which provides some insight into the decision concerning the 'Middle East 2006' failed appeal, which sought to raise funds in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the 2006 Israeli offensive on Lebanon (Tryhorn, 2006). The article quotes from a DEC press release which states,

The broadcasters have decided not to back a joint DEC appeal. This is because they are concerned about the stability of the ceasefire and, given the political complexities of the crisis, whether people would support it.

The article then quotes a BBC spokeswoman who conveys the Corporation's concerns about impartiality noting,

We really have to think about what the political sensitivities of the situation are ... The important thing is [the BBC's] overarching editorial framework and its requirement for impartiality ... This was discussed at the highest level and the feeling was that [the BBC] would not be able to maintain [its] impartiality. (Tryhorn, 2006)

Implicitly, the BBC's editorial concern with impartiality in the context of an appeal situated in the Middle East is evident in the reference to its 'editorial framework' of which impartiality is a cornerstone¹. The decision not to support the Lebanon appeal was a stance not exclusive to the BBC, but agreed upon by *all* broadcasters. The Guardian's website reported that the decision was a controversial one for some DEC charities who subsequently established their own independent appeals. However, the degree of controversy around Lebanon was nowhere near the level reached around the 2009 DEC emergency appeal for Gaza for the BBC.

Tracking the rise of the impartiality argument

Preserving the BBC's impartiality was identified by Mark Thompson as the key reason for the refusal of the DEC Gaza Appeal (Thompson 2009a; 2009c; 2009d). Elsewhere, we have outlined the rhetorical affordances of impartiality in the context of the Gaza crisis, which allowed the BBC to make and defend its controversial decision (Engelbert and McCurdy, 2011). The task at hand however, drawing on Marcus (1995), is to 'track' the rise of the discourse of impartiality as related to the request for a DEC appeal for Gaza.

Following convention, the DEC sent a formal request accompanied by a 'Case for Support', to the BBC and ITN who handle appeals for ITV and Channel 4 (Thompson, 2009b). On January 21, 2009 Diane Reid, the BBC Charitable Appeals Advisor submitted a briefing to Mark Thompson, the Director General of the BBC. The

¹ The concern over impartiality in the case of Lebanon was noted explicitly in a 'summary' of a meeting held between Mark Thompson and the BBC's Charity Appeals made public by the BBC Trust (see: BBC, 2009b).

memorandum noted that some members of the Charity Appeals Advisory Committee – a board of external ‘specialists’ in the charity sector – felt the scale of the situation in Gaza warranted an appeal and that some ‘internal sources’ at the BBC felt that a DEC appeal could be possible, provided ‘no mention is made of Israel in the actual appeal’ (BBC, 2009b). However, the formal advice from the BBC Charitable Appeals Advisor was ‘not to go ahead with the appeal, as the volatility and political complexity of the situation mean that the associated risks are too high’ (BBC, 2009b). Here, the reference to ‘associated risks’ can be read as alluding to the threat the appeal was seen to present to the BBC’s impartiality.

Later the same day, Mark Thompson held a conference call with four other BBC directors (Mark Byford, Deputy Director General; Helen Boaden, Director of BBC News; David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy and Standards; Jessica Cecil, Head of the Director-General’s Office, and Diane Reid, Charity Appeals Advisor). From this meeting a decision was taken to not broadcast a DEC emergency appeal for Gaza (BBC, 2009a). This decision was reportedly based on two factors. First, a concern that humanitarian agencies would not be able to deliver aid thus not meeting DEC ‘Criteria 2’ pertaining to access. Of note, the BBC’s concerns over access were eventually dropped after it was satisfied that DEC charities could access Gaza without interference, pressure or favour from the controlling authorities or other stakeholders². However, for the BBC the issue of access, while important, was not its primary concern around the appeal: its chief concern was over impartiality. The meeting minutes of Thompson’s conference call flag the issue of impartiality as follows,

Impartiality: public confidence in the BBC's impartiality would be compromised by broadcasting an appeal for Gaza in the current context of an ongoing news story. (BBC, 2009a)

The minutes capture the primary line of argument that the BBC would consistently invoke in support to its decision throughout the crisis. This decision was communicated

² For example, Caroline Thomson in her January 23, 2009 ‘Newsnight’ interview makes it explicitly clear that the BBC’s main concern is not access, but the issue of impartiality. Mark Thompson in his January 26, 2009 ‘Breakfast’ interview is also explicit on this matter.

by the BBC Charity Appeals Advisor in an email sent in the early evening of January 21, 2009 to the Chief Executive of the DEC which stated,

The decision was made because of question marks about the delivery of aid in a volatile situation and also to avoid any risk of compromising public confidence in the BBC's impartiality in the context of an ongoing news story. However we will, of course, continue to report the humanitarian story in Gaza. (BBC, 2009a)

The reference to an 'ongoing news story' within the email functions as an oblique, yet underlying reference to the Middle East conflict. The above rationale was carried forward to a January 22, 2009 BBC statement reported on the websites of the BBC and the Guardian³. Both news articles acknowledged the BBC's rejection of the appeal – using wording almost identical to the meeting minutes and email sent to the DEC – but also quoted other broadcasters (ITV and Sky) who stated that an appeal could not be carried as consensus between broadcasters on DEC appeals was both 'necessary' and part of 'convention' (Percival, 2009).

Interestingly, the same day as British media reported on the BBC's decision not to support an appeal, the DEC sent out a press release announcing the *launch* of a joint DEC emergency appeal for Gaza but made no mention of the decision of the BBC – or any of the broadcasters – not to support the appeal (Disasters Emergency Committee, 2009). This meant the Gaza DEC appeal was launched *without* obtaining the formal support of the RRN, and the BBC in particular. This move is significant as it diverges from the DEC's formal appeal process whereby the DEC and RRN (which includes the BBC) launch appeals together (DEC, 2008c).

The significance of the lack of broadcast endorsement of the DEC appeal was picked up by the media and on January 23, 2009 media interest in the lack of broadcast support – and specifically BBC support – for the appeal intensified. This was fuelled by the reported dissatisfaction with the decision by some BBC staff (Davies, Thorpe and Hinsliff, 2009), and the involvement of British International Development Secretary, Douglas Alexander, who sent letters to Channel 4, ITV and the BBC asking the

³ Interestingly, the statement does not appear under the 'official press releases' of the BBC. The first BBC statement to discuss the BBC's position concerning Gaza was the January 24, 2009 blog post by Mark Thompson (see: Thompson, 2009a).

broadcasters to reconsider their position (Foster and Bennett, 2009). Mark Thompson replied to Douglas Alexander's letter that same evening in a tone consistent with previous texts, stating that an appeal,

ran the risk of calling into question the public's confidence in the BBC's impartiality in its coverage of the story as a whole ... This is because Gaza remains an ongoing and highly controversial news story within which the human suffering and distress which have resulted from the conflict remain intrinsic and contentious elements. We have and will continue to cover the human side of the conflict fully across our news programmes and services. Within these bulletins and services, we can put the events in their wider context and draw attention to the claims and counter-claims that are made about them by the parties to the conflict and by others ... *We cannot however broadcast anything which we believe might compromise the impartiality of the BBC's journalism.* (Mark Thompson in Foster and Bennett, 2009, emphasis added)

Thompson's impartiality argument is consistent with the language noted in the executive minutes and the message sent to the DEC. A rhetorical move evident in Thompson's reply to Alexander, consistent with the statements of BBC Executives on the matter, is how what the Disasters Emergency Committee steadfastly promoted as an 'impartial' (DEC, 2008a) humanitarian campaign is folded into the field of journalism as part of an 'ongoing news story'.

Tracking the reinforcement of the impartiality argument

The evening of January 23, 2009 Caroline Thomson, Chief Operating Officer of the BBC, appeared on the BBC 2 TV programme 'Newsnight' explaining and defending the BBC's position. Thomson's Newsnight appearance marked the start of the Corporation's 'media offensive' whereby the BBC not only defended but entrenched itself in the 'impartiality' argument (Thomson 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Thompson 2009a, 2009c, 2009d).

January 24, 2009 was a significant day in the appeal controversy. First, a number of public figures in British society from celebrities to politicians to religious leaders began to weigh in on the crisis with their opinions – which were predominantly condemnations – of the BBC's decision (Foster, 2009). Public protests directed at the

BBC were also held in London, some out-front of BBC offices. Significantly, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 changed their position and announced they would air the DEC Gaza appeal. The broadcaster statements were reported in the media as follows,

ITV

After careful consideration, and in consultation with other networks, a common consensus has been reached by the majority of broadcasters and as a result ITV will broadcast a DEC appeal. (Independent Television News, 2009)

Channel 4

Channel 4 will broadcast the DEC appeal for humanitarian aid for civilians caught up in the Gaza conflict. We accept the DEC's guidance on the urgent need for humanitarian aid and believe this need should take precedence over any considerations as to the causes of the suffering that necessitates it ... We believe Channel 4's news coverage of the conflict in Gaza has at all times been appropriately impartial and we do not believe our impartiality will be compromised in the eyes of our audience by broadcasting this appeal. We have informed other broadcasters of our decision. (Dinnen, 2009)

Channel 5

Five feels this is an urgent humanitarian situation which transcends politics and has taken the decision to show the Gaza appeal (Independent Television News, 2009)

The articulation of different interpretations of impartiality by journalistic organisations illustrates the complex nature of impartiality. Although the above broadcasters changed their interpretation of impartiality and thus their position on holding an appeal, for the BBC, January 24, 2009 confirmed the BBC's earlier decision. This was achieved through Caroline Thomson media performances on Radio 4 and BBC TV News in which she again explained and defended the BBC's position. Of note is a non-BBC interview held that day on Channel 4 news between Caroline Thomson and presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy, where Thomson was pressed about broadcasters' diverging interpretations of 'impartiality':

Guru-Murthy: This is a decision which is normally taken in concert. The BBC's position has caused an unprecedented breakdown of communication between all the broadcasters. They think there is no problem; you think there is a problem. So do you now conclude that ITV, Channel 4 and 5 would have comprised their editorial integrity?

Thomson: I think decisions on impartiality are always fine judgments. They have looked at the fine judgment and taken a different one to us. That's their right. Although these have normally been done by consensus, there's no rule which says they have to be. And they've taken their own decision and I wouldn't comment on the validity of that. (Dinnen, 2009)

Above, Thomson expresses the view that media organisations should be able to autonomously exercise editorial independence. This stance is a means to respect that there may be different interpretations of impartiality but show unwillingness to debate the BBC's editorial decision against other such interpretations. That same day Mark Thompson, through a detailed posting on the BBC 'Editors blog', extended Caroline Thomson's argument by outlining the process whereby the BBC's decision was taken and defending the rationale that drove his decision (Thompson, 2009a).

The BBC's media campaign continued on Monday January 26, 2009, this time with Mark Thompson appearing on the 8:15am interview slot on Radio 4's 'Today' programme and then on BBC Breakfast TV later that morning. In both appearances Thompson explained his position emphasising the importance of impartiality yet was adamant that he, as the Director General, would not reconsider the decision to deny the appeal (Thompson 2009c; 2009d). These media appearances, characterised by Thompson's entrenchment in the impartiality argument, largely signalled the end of the media debate on the failed Gaza appeal. Later that same day, a statement from John Ryley, head of Sky News, was posted on the Sky News editors blog that expressed a similar position to that of the BBC with concern over impartiality (Bromley, 2009). It is interesting to note that the two media organisations who declined to participate in the national DEC campaign – Sky News and the BBC – both have global media interest and operations. The significance of this is returned to below. What did continue was a formal complaint on Mark Thompson's decision adjudicated by the BBC Trust. On February 19, 2009 the BBC Trust concluded that it was, 'satisfied that the decision the Director-

General took was reasonable having regard to the importance of preserving the reputation of the BBC for impartiality' (BBC Trust, 2009a).

Situating the BBC's denial of the DEC request

The above outlined chronology of the impartiality argument highlights the Corporation's emphasis on anticipating how audiences *could* interpret the BBC's airing of the appeal as partisan, and how such an interpretation *could* jeopardise audiences attributing impartiality to the BBC. The denial of the appeal and the reasons for so doing, thereby, mark an important shift away from an approach to impartiality whereby it is articulated as an inherent feature or ethos of the BBC's journalistic practices (see: Schlesinger, 1987) and, now also, its corporate decisions. Instead, impartiality, in both the run-up to and aftermath of the BBC's decision, is implied as a distinctive and laudable quality that license fee payers may *or may not* assign to the BBC. The shift from impartiality being 'in' the BBC to also residing in the judgement of audiences indeed fits with the BBC's recent efforts to re-interpret impartiality in the light of what is considered as a radically changed political, ideological and technological landscape. These efforts are most clearly articulated in the independent 'From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel. Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century' report, which was published and both approved and adopted by the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive Board in 2007. This second part of the article first situates the BBC's denial within such a 'wagon-wheel-approach' to impartiality, before it considers the BBC's decision as emblematic of how the BBC is bound by its global brand and by the issue of visibility.

The BBC's decision: a wagon wheel approach to impartiality

While European broadcasters, media moguls, politicians and lobbyists are increasingly calling for the abolition of the pursuit of impartiality for it would, among other things, impede the free-market mantra of choice, disable broadcasters' freedom of expression, and undermine television's conducive role in fostering political participation (see, Barnett, 2010, for a comprehensive list of arguments typically used *against* impartiality), the BBC has made reconsidering and attuning its 'linchpin' (Schlesinger, 1987) to key sociological and technological developments a central corporate concern.

An important moment in the process of reinterpreting impartiality was the 2005 Goodman Lecture on ‘The Future of Impartiality’ by the then BBC chairman Michael Grade. Grade’s idea that the deliverance of impartiality ‘is something the BBC can never take for granted’ refers to an assumption prevalent in subsequent institutional BBC discourse, namely that the public broadcaster operates in a changed political and ideological environment, in a multi-cultural society, or – as Grade called it a year later during an internal BBC seminar – a ‘world of plenty’. This society, in which the range of world views and opinions only increases and in which these opinions move beyond a simple left-right divide, would call for the Corporation to ensure that all license fee payers can recognise themselves in or on the BBC. At that same internal seminar in late 2006, held under the title ‘Impartiality: Fact or Fiction?’, former BBC politics editor Andrew Marr paved the way for what the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive Board, nearly a year later, would approve and adopt as the institutional response to this challenge. According to Marr, the BBC, in its consideration of what impartial coverage of political issues entails, was to move beyond its traditional approach of reducing an issue to two opposing positions to which it would then apply the journalistic principle of balance. To use Marr’s terms, the BBC was to move from ‘pendulum’ or ‘seesaw’ into a ‘wagon wheel’.

In June 2007, the BBC Trust published a document that explicitly drew on Marr’s adage. ‘From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel’ is a report initially commissioned by the then Board of Governors and is based on independent audience research and interviews with BBC staff and experts on the role and value of impartiality in the BBC. In addition to presenting the main findings of the different studies, the document proposes twelve guidelines for ‘safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century’ (BBC Trust, 2007). Central to these guidelines in applying impartiality is a reinterpretation of impartiality, one deemed reconcilable with Grade’s world of plenty. The report suggests a move away from the traditional seesaw position of holding the ‘centre ground’ as to ensure balance between two polar positions. Rather, based on the assumption that ‘the parameters of ‘normality’ and ‘extremism’ have shifted ... impartiality involves a breadth of views’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 7). The wagon wheel, then, is an analogue for an approach to impartiality with a variable centre and with the different spokes representing the views,

convictions and opinions of what the report describes as ‘today’s multi-polar Britain’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 5). Yet, distinct about the wagon wheel is that acknowledging multi-polarity does not automatically entail that all available positions and stances will receive quantitatively balanced coverage. Instead, in deciding on what would constitute impartiality, the journalist or producer is likened to an *alchemist*, with ingredients like balance, fairness, rigour and context available to produce the apt ‘complex cocktail’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 23).

The alchemist metaphor of the wagon wheel perspective brings to the fore an interesting dynamic. On the one hand, impartiality is the product of the BBC anticipating or envisioning its broad and diverse audiences, making sure that either different ‘rational and honest’ views (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 7) are included or that audiences at least trust the BBC to acknowledge complexity and move beyond the traditional simplicity of bipolarity. Yet, on the other hand, editorial judgements and decisions on what we may consider as ‘due impartiality’, a term that is given explicit emphasis in the renewed BBC Editorial Guidelines of 2010, are ultimately the prerogative of the BBC, and should ‘not be driven solely by audience reaction’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 31). Consequently, impartiality becomes a signifier of quality that is assigned by the BBC’s key ‘stakeholders’ and thus serves to meet requirements for displaying public value, whilst impartiality is also established as fundamentally resilient against partisan audience campaigns. Impartiality, then, is to be safeguarded as the distinctive feature of the BBC ‘brand’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 28), as exceptional in a media landscape where increasingly partisanship and (re)presenting particular positions prove to be the commercial *raison d’être*.

The very fact that the BBC decided not to air the DEC appeal for Gaza for how audience interpretations of airing the appeal could impair the *perception of impartiality* thereby perfectly complies with the two most prominent guiding principles in the Wagon Wheel report, namely that ‘impartiality is and remains the hallmark of the BBC’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 25, Guiding Principle 1), and that it is ‘an essential part of the BBC’s contract with the audience ... [with the] most precious prize that the BBC can win [being] the trust of its audience’ (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 29, Guiding Principle 2).

There are more guiding principles for applying impartiality that are clearly oriented to in the BBC's decision. For example, the media performances of Mark Thompson and Caroline Thomson, in which the BBC Executives accounted for the decision, imply an approach to impartiality as 'a process about which the BBC should be honest and transparent with its audience' (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 74, Guiding Principle 11). In addition, the fact that the impartiality argument has been applied to the DEC appeal, to something that is not as explicitly a BBC production as for example its own news programmes would be, highlights that 'no genre is exempt' (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 47, Guiding Principle 6). Moreover, impartiality is not only to be considered as a limiting regime, but especially as an enabling orientation in programming and decisions, as 'impartiality is no excuse for insipid programming' (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 42, Guiding Principle 5).

In accounting for the decision in a range of radio and television programmes, Chief Operational Officer Caroline Thomson clearly draws on this fifth principle by consistently presenting the BBC's efforts in its news coverage of the Middle East as highly daring and bold. For example, she asserts on BBC's 'Newsnight' on January 23, 2009 that 'we've been almost unique amongst journalists and broadcasters in having people inside Gaza when the Israeli's weren't letting us' (Thomson, 2009a), and argues on BBC's 'News24' a day later that 'we think that our role here is absolutely primary first and foremost on being an impartial fearless reporter of the truth' (Thomson, 2009c). Thomson's contributions emphasise that an approach to impartiality would work without 'fear or favour' (Thomson, 2009a), with the BBC not being afraid to reveal and expose what some might experience as uncomfortable. This approach resembles what Peter Horrocks, the then Head of BBC TV News, in 2006 called 'radical impartiality', affirming the need to include all sides of the story and treat them 'with the same level of sceptical inquiry and respect' (see: Horrocks, 2006; Petley, 2009, for a contextualisation; Seaton, 2007, for a discussion of the term 'hard impartiality'). More explicitly, Thomson's assertions also articulate the guiding principle of the Wagon Wheel report that 'impartiality involves a breadth of view', in which all points of views 'are subject to equal scrutiny', ensuring that 'it is not the BBC's role to close down the debate' (BBC Trust, 2007, pp. 7, Guiding Principle 4).

The BBC's decision: global branding and visibility

The exceptional nature of the BBC's decision not to air the DEC appeal must be understood in the context of Corporation's recent efforts to re-interpret impartiality, which entails moving away from the traditional 'seesaw' model in favour of a view of impartiality as a 'wagon wheel'. Yet, the case of the failed appeal simultaneously provides us with insights into how the BBC perceives and manages 'impartiality risks' that are – apparently – particularly salient when the BBC moves into the territory of either reporting or otherwise engaging with the Middle East conflict. That is, Mark Thompson's description of 'Gaza' as a 'major and contentious ongoing news story' foremost points towards an increasingly dominant institutional view of BBC coverage and other editorial decisions about *this particular conflict* as highly vulnerable to being politicised, both through audience (mis)interpretations and through the conflict's 'protagonists' considering BBC coverage as an important 'prize' (Independent Panel, 2006, pp. 10-12). Especially in the light of critical academic studies of BBC's Middle East reporting (Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011; Downey et al., 2006), the unpublished 2004 Balen Report and the 2006 Independent Panel Report that assesses the BBC's impartiality in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Independent Panel, 2006), the BBC increasingly approaches Middle East coverage as a hazardous endeavour whose *risk* can be managed by sticking to protocol (Barkho, 2008) or to a 'Guiding Hand' (Independent Panel, 2006, p. 8). The perception of editorial decisions as a 'risk' (Beck, 1992; McCurdy, 2011) for their potential to impede the BBC's impartiality needs to be understood in the context of how the BBC is increasingly bound by the global nature of its brand and the visibility of the Middle East conflict.

Although DEC appeals are produced for a domestic British audience, the BBC must be seen not only as a national public broadcaster, but equally as a leading branded news provider in a global market. Related, Sky News who also declined to run the DEC Gaza appeal domestically due to 'impartiality' concerns equally has international news operations. In the wake of the 'commodification of trust' (Silverstone, 1999, pp. 123), the currency that news organisations trade on is the trust audiences invest and maintain in them. It is trust in a news organisation – in its brand and its ability to deliver content consistent with that brand – which helps to generate and maintain an audience (Thussu,

2008). Thus the maintenance of trust is vital to a news organisation's business model and impartiality is a vital signifier of trust. Stories or actions which may be perceived to be inconsistent with a news organisation's brand of journalism could compromise audience trust, its brand as a news organisation and, ultimately, its business model. Thus while the DEC appeal was domestic, as Franks and Seaton (2009, pp. 15) observe, 'in a global broadcasting world, impartiality is not solely for domestic consumption'. This is particularly true for broadcasters with national and international audiences and responsibilities. From this perspective, the airing of the domestic DEC appeal for Gaza may be seen as a significant 'risk' to the ongoing global news commitments of both the BBC and Sky in reporting on the Middle East crisis. Consequently, in its corporate decisions, the BBC (as well as Sky) is bound by its global operations.

Another factor that greatly shapes the nature and scope of the BBC's decision-making is *visibility* in two related senses; the global visibility of the BBC brand, and the status of the Middle East crisis as a highly visible 'ongoing' news story. Above we have already acknowledged the importance of the global operations of the BBC. Here it is important to stress just how visible the BBC is as a global news provider. According to Thussu (2008, p. 172), the BBC – through the BBC World Service, BBC World News and its online offerings – is the world's most trusted news brand. The salient point is that the BBC is, and sees itself as, a highly *visible* news organisation with global reach in coverage and audiences.

The second sense of visibility refers to the Middle East conflict itself as arguably one of the world's most contentious and visible contemporary struggles. It is a conflict which plays out in the court of world opinion through, among other things, its representation in the news (Philo and Berry, 2004). The Independent Panel Report (2006, pp. 11-12) into the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict recognised the importance of news coverage in the conflict stating,

... the media themselves are part of the contested ground, and it is a strategic objective of the protagonists to secure coverage which reflects and reinforces their version of reality. Since the conflict is not only local but engages also widespread international support and sponsorship, the BBC, which is regarded and influential internationally as well as in the UK, and the nature of its coverage, are important prizes.

Above, the BBC exhibits an awareness of their news coverage as both a site *for* political struggle and as a ‘prize’ *of* political struggle. To this end, the BBC has undertaken a number of measures to try and ensure its coverage of the Middle East conflict is impartial (Grade, 2005; Independent Panel, 2006). Given the importance of audience trust to the BBC, efforts to monitor and assess its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be seen as measures to maintain audience trust in their coverage of this issue and of their coverage more generally. In sum, the BBC is a highly visible global news brand covering one of the world’s most visible and contentious conflicts. Airing the domestic charitable DEC appeal was seen by the BBC as posing a risk to audience perceptions around the partiality of its Middle East coverage. From this perspective, impartiality is not just a matter of following journalistic protocol; it is also – in the light of the dominant discourse of public value (Born, 2004; Thumim and Chouliaraki, 2010) – a distinctive quality that is to be constantly (re-)assigned to the BBC by its audiences (Engelbert and McCurdy, 2011).

Conclusion

In a time where the dominance of a market-driven, neo-liberal discourse of broadcasting has resulted in a perception of impartiality as an unnecessary constraint that limits television broadcasting’s scope of commercial and civic possibilities, the BBC’s persistence on impartiality is highly laudable (cf. Barnett, 2010). Yet, the potential for this persistence is, of course, foremost enabled by the BBC having been very successful in branding key public service adages, such as impartiality, as distinctive and ‘unique selling points’ in an increasingly competitive media landscape. In addition, we have seen how the new approach to impartiality can in fact be relatively comfortably reconciled with key (global) economic developments that the BBC is bound by *and* is initiating itself. In other words, while the BBC’s decision that airing the DEC appeal for Gaza would impede audiences’ *perception* of the BBC’s impartiality is emblematic of the importance that the BBC keeps assigning to the pursuit of impartiality, the BBC’s reconceptualization of the term is also indicative of public service broadcasting increasingly working according to the logic of consumer sovereignty. This paradox raises

an important question about the function of impartiality for the BBC as a public service broadcaster with a long-standing charitable record: Does impartiality remain a rationale for *action*, or does it progressively become a foundation for *inaction*?

While the BBC's understanding of impartiality establishes itself as not having an 'evaluative commitment to any' as Schlesinger (1987) argued; the BBC's stance also includes a non-commitment to humanitarian action if it threatens its journalistic impartiality. Yet, journalistic impartiality does not necessarily discount human suffering: it acknowledges human suffering but seeks to keep it in the journalist frame. However, is this really 'as close' to humanitarianism as journalism can get? Writing on the DEC Gaza crisis, Franks and Seaton (2009) argue that journalists must not engage in moral campaigns, but must practice a necessary indifference or 'a-morality' so as to continue 'witnessing' the suffering of others. Conversely, former BBC journalist Martin Bell (2009), in line with his call for a 'journalism of attachment' (Bell, 1998), considers this position 'indefensible'.

Aware of these debates, the BBC's invocation of impartiality in this instance begs the need for inquiry into the failed Gaza appeal from a moral and ethical perspective. This article has shown that the BBC has a track record of approving DEC Appeals for victims of conflict yet, in this instance, maintaining the core of the BBC's brand: its journalistic impartiality (both real and perceived) took precedence. The ethical and moral challenge this raises is the differentiation made between the sufferers of past conflicts granted a DEC appeal and those of Gaza, one of the world's most visible conflicts, being denied an appeal.

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