



Impartiality at the BBC?

An investigation into the background and claims of Stuart Prebble's 'Independent Assessment for the BBC Trust'

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Newswatch is one of the UK's leading media monitoring organisations. It has conducted more than 30 separate reports into elements of the BBC's output, including for the Centre for Policy Studies, and has acted as consultant in a number of independent media surveys. It has also recently given evidence to the Commons European Scrutiny Committee's audit of broadcasters' EU-related coverage.



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Summary

In this report Newswatch finds that the BBC's independent Prebble report¹ – which the BBC Trustees claimed gave a clean bill of health to the Corporation's coverage of the EU,² immigration and religion – is seriously flawed.

Newswatch has unearthed ties between Stuart Prebble and the BBC, between the BBC and the university department which conducted the supposedly impartial research, and between the university's project director and the EU. The independence of the project is thus severely compromised.

The Prebble report included programme research from periods in 2007 and 2012 conducted by the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, a department of Cardiff University. It was published last July, and the BBC Trustee who commissioned it, David Liddiment, claimed that it provided independent verification that the BBC's coverage of these key areas was impartial, and contained a wide range of views from across the political spectrum; that it thus met the terms of the BBC's Charter and Guidelines. This claim was supported by the other Trustees and the Chairman, Lord Patten.

Mr Prebble and Mr Liddiment were close professional colleagues at Granada TV for many years. Mr Prebble was also from 2002-10 the chief executive and part owner of Liberty Bell,³ a television production company which made programmes for the BBC.

Senior members of the Cardiff University department are former BBC executives, including Richard Sambrook, a former Head of BBC News, and Richard Tait, a former editor of Newsnight, who served as a BBC Governor and Trustee from 2004-10. The BBC Trustees commissioned the research upon which Mr Prebble largely relied directly from Professor Sambrook.

Professor Sambrook's colleague, who directed the research, had recently been paid by the EU to analyse media coverage on further integration, and why the UK was sceptical about that prospect.

The clean bill of health on the EU component of the Report was delivered despite repeated warnings from many quarters, including the BBC's own former director general, Mark Thompson, as well as political editor Nick Robinson, that the Corporation's EU coverage was biased against so-called right-wing opinion. These followed earlier revelations from former senior BBC presenters and editors such as Peter Sissons, Rod Liddle and Robin Aitken, who said the same thing in different ways.

More recently, John Humphrys, arguably the BBC's highest profile and most respected presenter, has also said that coverage of the EU has been guilty of 'bias by omission'.⁴ (For example, it almost entirely failed to air the case of those who want to leave the EU, despite its promise after the 2005 Wilson Report that it would do so.)

The following report also demonstrates how Cardiff's methodology does not meet basic standards of academic inquiry:

- The Cardiff researchers made biased assumptions about their data which meant that a serious skew in sampling techniques was amplified. For example, they claimed that the BBC was biased towards Euroscepticism, yet, in the case of the Today programme, 20 of the 21 pro-EU speakers during Cardiff's 2012 survey were either omitted or ignored, giving a false impression of pro-EU voices being under represented.
- Stuart Prebble also seriously compounded the errors of Cardiff by introducing evidence of his own gathered outside the survey periods. This, it transpires, was given to him – and apparently accepted by Mr Prebble uncritically - by unnamed BBC editorial staff. Further investigation by Newswatch has shown that this additional 'evidence' provides no basis for Mr Prebble's claim that the programmes involved met the BBC's standards of editorial impartiality.
- The Cardiff researchers have compounded their errors by going into print in the national press and a book with different claims that the BBC's EU coverage is skewed against Europhiles and the left.⁵ These claims are also not supported by their data. For example, conclusions about the amount of coverage of those favouring withdrawal from the EU were drawn from samples so small as to be almost meaningless.

Cumulatively, these basic errors mean that the EU part of the report was not independent and not worth the paper it was written on.

In turn, the BBC Trustees – the ultimate regulatory body of the corporation - have not exercised proper scrutiny in reaching their conclusion that the EU output was properly balanced. This raises serious questions about their own impartiality – and competence.

Background to the Prebble report

The Stuart Prebble report into the BBC's coverage of immigration, religion and the EU was published on July 3 2013. It was commissioned by the BBC Trust in August 2012 following claims that output in these areas was biased, particularly against groups regarded by the BBC to be on the right of British politics, including UKIP and Migration Watch. In a statement welcoming the publication of the Prebble report, David Liddiment, the BBC Trustee who commissioned it, suggested that it had provided 'generally positive findings'. He accepted it also raised a raft of minor concerns, but said these would be dealt with by BBC editorial staff over the coming year. He promised a review of progress in the summer of 2014.

What follows is an analysis of the EU component, which must raise doubts about the other areas as well.

Mr Liddiment's key observation was that the Prebble report had found that 'a broad and impressive range of opinions' on its news, current affairs and factual programmes was carried, with no persuasive evidence that significant areas of opinion were not represented. Put another way relevant to this investigation, the Prebble report was used by the Trustees as the basis to say that the corporation's EU-related output was properly balanced and contained sufficient 'breadth of opinion'. The critics were wrong. Mr Liddiment asserted:

Ensuring that a wide range of views are seen and heard on the BBC is at the heart of the BBC's enviable reputation for impartial journalism, and I am grateful to Stuart Prebble for his independent assessment of the BBC's progress. Our impartiality reviews are an important inducement for the Executive to question itself, in this case on its breadth of opinion, to ensure it is doing all it can to achieve what licence fee payers expect and that it is constantly alert to changing public opinion.

We deliberately chose some complex and controversial subject areas for the review in immigration, religion, and the EU, and our generally positive findings are testament to programme-makers across the corporation. It is clear that there is more to do and we will look to the Executive to deliver on this.

Mr Liddiment also noted that the Report's findings were based on content analysis of BBC News material by the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, a department of the University of Cardiff. He declared that the findings of this exercise were 'largely positive', despite some elements of immigration coverage having had shortcomings. Thus the BBC Trustees, the corporation's highest regulatory body, essentially judged that the Prebble report had given its EU

coverage a clean bill of health on the basis that both Mr Prebble and Cardiff's 'independent' research had found only minor areas of criticism.

However, in the period following the publication of the Prebble report, academics linked to the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies began to make direct political points about the BBC's output, seemingly using the Prebble report research, and in particular claiming that this data showed a bias to the right. Cardiff journalism lecturer Mike Berry, in an August 2013 blog post,⁶ claimed that his department had empirical evidence showing right-wing bias at the BBC. Mr Berry's article was picked up and reprinted by the *New Statesman* just hours later.⁷ Then in February 2014, *The Independent* newspaper published an article by Professor Justin Lewis, head of the Cardiff School, entitled 'How the BBC leans to the right'.⁸ The article revealed that, once again, Cardiff had seemingly isolated specific parts of the Prebble dataset to reach wider conclusions on BBC impartiality. In March 2014, political commentator Owen Jones, writing in the *Guardian*,⁹ used the statistical claims originally made by Mike Berry to substantiate his argument that the BBC's right wing bias was a threat to democracy.

The specific claims made by the Cardiff academics included: that the ratio in favour of Conservative politicians appearing on BBC News in 2012 was greater than it was in favour of Labour figures in 2007; that although UKIP received very little airtime, Euroscepticism was very well-represented through Conservative politicians; that voices arguing for the benefits of EU membership were very sparse; that the BBC was more likely than either ITV or Channel 4 to use sources from the right, such as US Republicans or UKIP.

Initial analysis by Newswatch of the print articles and the original Cardiff data (published as part of the Prebble report)¹⁰ concluded that such claims could not be supported, and that they were at odds with Newswatch's own database. It therefore embarked upon a systematic and thorough investigation into Cardiff's methodology, to attempt to establish why.

The result was the unearthing of both severe shortcomings with Cardiff's research approach, and serious flaws in the interpretation of their data. Newswatch's investigation raises major concerns:

- Did the Prebble Inquiry properly assess the BBC's output?
- Was it at all 'independent' as was claimed – or was the sample biased?

- In turn, did the report put the BBC Trustees in the position David Liddiment claimed it did – of being able to make valid judgements about BBC news content?

In the sections that follow, the shortcomings in the data methodology are outlined.

The Cardiff sample

Cardiff collected data from six BBC News programmes, along with online sources, over two one-month periods in 2007 and 2012. The most significant of these, Radio 4's 'Today' programme, was monitored for less than half its total airtime. Cardiff missed completely eight programme editions in their 2012 sample, presumably due to technical problems with the monitoring process, including, significantly, two editions of BBC2's Newsnight.

Convenience sampling

The first problem with Cardiff's sample relates to how it was initially selected. The BBC Trust asked Cardiff to answer the question:

Is there evidence of a move from a “seesaw” view of impartiality towards a “wagon wheel” model between 2007 and 2012?

This was a direct reference to the BBC Trust's 2007 Bridcut report, which had set out a new model for impartiality in news and current affairs reporting. However, rather than selecting a sample of BBC news coverage best suited to answering this question, the Cardiff researchers apparently recycled for the Prebble report a piece of research from 2007 which had originally been gathered for a survey of the BBC's coverage of the UK's nations and regions. It was thus a prime example of '**convenience sampling**', defined in the academic literature on broadcast monitoring methodology as a sample which is not properly preconceived and directed, and instead is 'more the product of expediency, chance and opportunity than of deliberate intent.'¹¹ There are two forms of convenience sampling, 'strong' and 'weak', with 'weak' being the least desirable form, and where 'sample units and clusters are selected simply because they are nearest to hand.'¹²

The Cardiff research for the BBC Trust was based entirely upon just such a convenience sample. It was thus not fully fit for purpose. It is a mystery why a report publicly stated to be a 'before and after' comparison chose both samples from after the Bridcut report. The choice poses a further major question about the validity of the methodology; they analysed both a 'weak' sample and one from the wrong period.

Constant errors

Cardiff's sampling methodology also generated what research literature describes as '**constant errors**' – structural biases emanating from initial monitoring choices which subsequently distort their sample's representative qualities. Cardiff actually elected to monitor less than half of the Today programme, but then compounded that limitation. Rather than mounting a rolling sample which would, over the month, gather representative data from the whole of the programme, they focused rigidly on the 7am to 8.30am block, and ignored Saturday broadcasts altogether.

Given Today's structure, this decision had serious consequences that from the outset would inevitably impact upon Cardiff's data interpretation and conclusions. For example, Today's main business news section is broadcast during the first half hour of the programme, from 6.15-6.30am. As a result, Cardiff's sample would have constantly under-represented business opinion – a vital ingredient of EU output. Similarly, two-way discussions between presenters and correspondents, an essential component of Today, would have been seriously under-emphasised as at least six of these segments are broadcast during the first hour of Today on weekday mornings, whereas the rest of the programme is more likely to carry interviews with invited guests. The regular 'Yesterday in Parliament' slot, (usually broadcast Tuesday to Friday at 6.45am, and at 7.20am on Saturdays), was also omitted entirely, thereby affecting the data for (and potentially the balance between) political speakers. And the religious affairs slot 'Thought for the Day' would have achieved more than twice its actual statistical prominence, because it is regularly positioned at the same time each morning, and would have been captured in all monitored programmes.

Of course, more accurate results would have been generated simply by monitoring Today in its entirety, but failing that, the better methodology would have been to start their one and a half hours of monitoring at different points each morning, to ensure that their data was not affected by the structural factors inherent to Today.¹³

Sample size

In research methodology, there are no firm rules relating to the size of the sample. However, it is certain that too small a sample will not yield reliable results. Since 1999, Newswatch has monitored over 6,000 hours of BBC News coverage across numerous BBC News and current affairs programme strands, has fully transcribed more than 8,200 individual EU reports, and has collected data on some 5,000 guest contributors. By contrast, Cardiff based their conclusions on just 272 hours

of broadcast output and 208 EU 'stories'.¹⁴ As such, Cardiff's EU sample was up to 40 times smaller than that available to Newswatch.

Cardiff – seemingly through choice – also narrowed their potential sample even further. A key component of their research focused solely on the main EU stories during each survey period: the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 and negotiations on the EU Budget in 2012. Both themes accounted for roughly 70% of the total EU coverage. They therefore discarded from this area of analysis 30% of the material they had actually gathered. Yet, University of Cardiff Lecturer Mike Berry, writing in the *New Statesman*, came to some very bold conclusions about what it had established. He asserted that 'in both cases (2007 and 2012) the debate was dominated by the representatives of the two main parties and the EU was framed narrowly as a threat to British interests', and that although UKIP received very little airtime, 'Euroscepticism was very well represented through Conservative politicians.' He added that 'voices arguing for the benefits of EU membership were very sparse', and said this was a consequence of Labour politicians being unwilling to make the positive case for Europe.¹⁵

In the same period of the Cardiff research (October 15-November 15, 2012), Newswatch monitored all editions of Today, collated a list of all the EU-related coverage and the speakers on EU topics, and coded these contributions according to the opinions expressed. Newswatch identified 21 guest contributors who spoke in favour of the EU or a particular element of EU legislation. Our subsequent research has established that 12 of these speakers would have been missed altogether by Cardiff because, as explained previously, the researchers sampled only half of all weekday editions of Today, and none of the Saturday editions. The nine further speakers who appeared between 7am and 8.30am on weekdays contributed on a variety of topically important EU matters: a discussion of Scotland's relationship with the EU; tighter banking supervision in the eurozone; the Germans appointing a new currency commissioner; MEPs calling to tighten EU laws on medical implants; and EU proposals to force all major European companies to reserve at least 40% of their board seats for women. Yet – and this is crucial – Cardiff's sample was narrowed further by excluding any items that it did not consider to be specifically about the UK's relationship with the European Union, including reports on EU leaders, the euro crisis or other countries' relations with the EU. Cardiff do not explain their precise coding methodology, so it is impossible to know how many of the remaining nine speakers would have been excluded on account of these criteria. However, because Cardiff selected just one issue for primary analysis – that of the EU budget – eight of the nine remaining guests would

have been discounted anyway, as only one of the remaining pro-EU speakers offered commentary on the budget theme.

Thus, when Cardiff's Mike Berry noted that "voices arguing for the benefits of EU membership were very sparse", this was clearly a consequence of an approach which reduced the sample of 21 pro-EU speakers recorded by Newswatch to just a single speaker. Put a different way, this methodology would have identified only 4% of the total number of pro-EU speakers who appeared on Today between 15 Oct and 15 Nov 2012.

The three sections above refer to fundamental flaws in the approaches adopted by Cardiff in their data sampling. Together, they raise serious questions about the validity of the research used by the Prebble report. It provided inadequate data – particularly, for example, in the sample size of EU-related speakers – to support the conclusions about breadth of opinion and balance. But these limitations were compounded by a series of further fundamental errors by both Cardiff and Stuart Prebble himself in their joint and cumulative approach to the gathering and use of data.

Misunderstanding the case for withdrawal

Cardiff made a number of assumptions about the nature of Euroscepticism which were value-loaded and clearly biased against the withdrawal case. The analysis of Euroscepticism, for example appeared to be based on a narrow assumption that Conservatives and UKIP were from this same part of the political spectrum on the 'right' with interchangeable and very similar views. In turn, they judged that Conservative 'Eurosceptic' arguments were broadly similar to UKIP ones, and assumed that therefore if Conservatives appeared to be making 'Eurosceptic' arguments, they were reflecting the UKIP standpoint, without providing any evidence or analysis that this was the case.

Cardiff's research noted that UKIP appearances had actually fallen from eight during their 2007 survey period to four during their 2012 survey period, despite a rise in electoral support for UKIP in that five year period.¹⁶ However, rather than view this as a cause for concern, the Cardiff research team – in an analysis subsequently echoed by Stuart Prebble and the BBC Trust – gave two explanations. First they said that the views of UKIP were 'amply represented elsewhere'.¹⁷

Similarly, the decline in the prominence of the UK Independence Party as a source – from 2.7% to 1.4% of political affiliations – was somewhat surprising: after all, UKIP had been heralded as a great success story after winning 13 seats in the 2009 European Parliament election to the European Parliament, beating the Labour Party in gaining 16.5% of the vote, and the party also performed well in the 2010 General Election, even if it stopped short of gaining a seat in the House of Commons. Nonetheless, as we will later discuss in more detail, the Eurosceptic views held by UKIP were well represented by other sources, primarily from the Conservative Party.¹⁸

This raises the question of whether Cardiff really understood the basic nature of the field of inquiry. A central pivot of the debate about the UK's relationship with the EU is that many believe that the case for withdrawal has not been properly reflected in BBC output. Yet the researchers crudely lumped together UKIP and Conservative standpoints as if they were very similar (if not the same) and argued that even if UKIP had not appeared, then Conservatives had made their case for them, and that therefore the withdrawal case had been adequately reflected.

Newswatch's research, covering a much longer time frame and utilising a much more systematic approach to data gathering, has found that such a sweeping assumption cannot actually be supported. Conservative MPs and other figures do, of course, on occasion mention (but have not made the argument for it) the case for withdrawal, but in 221 full weeks of analysis of the Today programme, between 2005 and 2013, Newswatch's research shows that Conservative withdrawalists appeared on only 14 occasions (equating to less than four times a year) and UKIP appearances outnumbered those by the Conservative withdrawalists by a ratio of almost six to one. Conservative 'come out' supporters made only 0.4% of the total EU-related speaker appearances, compared to 2.2% from UKIP.

Given the nature of Cardiff's brief and the overall field of inquiry set by Prebble, the 50% reduction of UKIP appearances between 2007 and 2012 ought to have surely been identified as a major cause for concern. Yet it was not. Cardiff simply observed this was 'surprising' because electoral support for the party had increased significantly during the five years. They then said that it was explicable (and by implication, justifiable) because withdrawalist views had been expressed by Conservatives.

It is not possible to work out how, exactly, Cardiff arrived at the conclusion that the views held by UKIP were 'amply represented' by Conservative sources. It seems they had failed to appreciate that there are fundamental difference between 'Eurosceptics' (a label which is applicable to the vast majority of Conservative ministers, including the prime minister himself, who wish to see the terms of EU

membership renegotiated, but for Britain to remain within the EU) and 'withdrawalists', who want the UK leave the EU.

Even Cardiff's own data provides information to the contrary, but this was not explored or investigated within their main analysis. For example, a chart looking at the arguments deployed in 2012 in coverage of the EU Budget showed the contention that 'Britain should leave the EU' accounted for only about 5% of the total opinions expressed,¹⁹ and that in 2007, in arguments over the Lisbon Treaty, this argument had not been used at all.²⁰ It therefore seems clear that the case for withdrawal was not being taken up by other guests, Conservative or otherwise, to any significant extent.

The second explanation given by Cardiff for the 50% decline in UKIP coverage in their sample was contained within an extraordinary footnote to the main text:

Given the BBC is confident it has responded appropriately to the increased popularity of UKIP this figure may be a function of the dates or programmes sampled.²¹

This shows that the researchers accepted at face value an unsubstantiated BBC assurance about its own output that coverage of UKIP had been improved. Yet the whole point of the Cardiff research was that it was commissioned by the BBC Trustees (at a cost of £20,000 +) to provide a totally independent assessment of the corporation's EU output. That is a most irregular way of proceeding with an 'independent' survey, to an extent that surely invalidates the findings.

Stuart Prebble

Stuart Prebble appeared to accept without question that the Cardiff research was properly conducted and therefore provided independent evidence that the BBC's EU coverage was satisfactory. But he also decided to embellish those findings with his own observations and 'evidence' about output.

In his investigation, his conclusions make clear that he spoke to a wide range of BBC staff. It is also evident that he also used these sessions to gather their impressions about EU coverage. However, completely at odds with normal research practice, he used this clearly subjective material as 'objective' data about coverage side-by-side with the Cardiff data. And the material from BBC personnel – not linked at all with the Cardiff material or from their data-sampling periods – formed the core of his fundamental argument that the EU coverage was in line with quality and impartiality requirements. Put another way, the basic premise of the Prebble report, in commissioning the Cardiff research was to provide verifiable, independent, academic research that would underpin and validate its findings. But

Mr Prebble decided to introduce his own data, some of it apparently provided to him by BBC editors and some from his own (unexplained) selections from BBC programmes, and gave it equal, if not greater weight.

One of his key assertions about 'satisfactory' withdrawal coverage was that Today had dispatched presenter Evan Davis to Birmingham to undertake an 'unusually long' Today programme report from the autumn 2012 UKIP conference in Birmingham. He said this had featured 'a healthy mix of conference attendees'.²² Mr Prebble did not provide a full citation for the programme item, but from Newswatch's own records it appears that he was referring to a package broadcast on September 21, 2012 at 8.32am (almost a month before the Cardiff sampling period). However, analysis of the transcript shows that, although material was gathered at the UKIP conference from UKIP delegates, the report was not actually about withdrawal. The majority of the eleven contributors to the package said nothing at all about the EU and most discussed UKIP as a political party and its conference more generally. It was a 'colour' piece about being at a party political conference. Of the five speakers who did speak on EU matters, none made any reference to the case for withdrawal. Thus, although the package was eight and a half minutes in total (and thus was a 'long' Today item, though not exceptionally so), the five who spoke about the EU gave a combined contribution of just 200 words, or just over a minute of airtime. None of this was explored or even noted by Mr Prebble – he apparently accepted at face value from whoever gave him the information that this was important coverage of the withdrawal perspective.

One of the key planks of Mr Prebble's self-gathered 'evidence' of adequate withdrawal coverage was that 'UKIP representatives appeared on Question Time panels five times in six months from October 2012.'²³ But this figure is actually statistically meaningless. One swallow does not make a summer. Mr Prebble appeared to assume that because UKIP appeared, the withdrawal perspective must also have been properly aired and the spokesmen (and the topic) treated in a fair and balanced manner. Without detailed transcript analysis there is no means of knowing if this was the case. This was not therefore valid evidence. Rather its inclusion demonstrates that Mr Prebble was prepared to include data unquestioningly and almost indiscriminately.

Mr Prebble also listed an impressive-sounding roster of 'non-news' EU-related programming, including BBC2's 'The Great Euro Crash', Panorama's reports on farm subsidies and on the Greek financial crisis, an edition of File on 4 called 'The Bill for Brussels' and an episode of Radio 4's Analysis, entitled 'Eurogeddon'.²⁴ Although he used this inventory to imply in his analysis that there was a wide

breadth of EU-related coverage, he did so without analysing and assessing this material. He provided no evidence that these programmes did tackle EU-themes in a balanced, informative and engaging manner. His impressions were entirely subjective. It is thus impossible to say how impartial or wide-ranging the reporting was, or what potential problems these programmes may have thrown up in relation to 'fairness' or balance. Yet his brief was to investigate not simply whether EU content had been carried, but rather that it had been done so in a proper manner. When Mr Prebble did focus on the specifics of a particular Radio 4 EU strand, he was unqualified in his praise, opining that the programmes were 'excellent', 'explained brilliantly' and 'an absolutely fascinating analysis.'

Anyone harbouring the view about the BBC that it is by instinct in favour of EU membership, albeit with reservations, might have felt that they had their suspicions reinforced by listening to the excellent three-part series on Europe presented on Radio 4 by Allan Little. Broadcast on three consecutive weeks in January and February 2012, the first programme (Reshaping Europe) was an absolutely fascinating analysis of the modern history and political importance of the EU post the fall of the Berlin Wall; the second programme (Breaking the Pact) gave an equally fascinating and insightful perspective on the consequences of the failure of the EU to enforce the "Stability and Growth Pact"; and the final programme (Deeper Not Wider), argued powerfully the case for Britain to play a far more active role in the future shaping of Europe, on the basis that the job would otherwise be done by Germany, which does not want to do it. The themes of the series were revisited at the end of the year, two days before Christmas, in another excellent programme by Allan Little entitled "Europe Moves East," in which Allan gained remarkable access to a whole range of very senior political and academic figures with specialist knowledge of aspects of Europe which we seldom hear reported. Altogether it explained brilliantly some of the serious fault lines in the structure of the EU, and the case for the UK playing a bigger and more dynamic role in addressing significant problems; however in four programmes all about Britain's role in the EU, there was not a single voice expressing the view that the UK would be better off out. You could almost hear the groans from the withdrawalist camp.²⁵

This does not fit at all with dispassionate broadcast output analysis. Mr Prebble's brief was to be an independent investigator. Rather than addressing the lack of withdrawalist speakers as an example of potential bias, he seemed to be at pains – over material selectively provided to him by the same senior BBC executives he was supposedly assessing – to lavish admiration upon both the quality of the programmes and the journalist involved. Although he mentions that those in 'the withdrawalist camp' might be troubled by the lack of withdrawalist representation, he fails to grasp that there would also have been 'groans' from Eurosceptics (and even some pro-Europeans) who have been pressing for a level-playing field, and a

rigorously equitable examination of the issues at stake. In addition, he ignores the obvious point that a proportion of the audience might not be in any particular camp at all, and listening to the programmes with an open mind. They could have had their minds changed, had they been provided with material which adequately and impartially covered all sides of the debate. Mr Prebble was keen to stress that his own political views did not preclude him from conducting a free and fair investigation of the issues involved:

...the charge which is most frequently made about impartiality within the BBC is based on the notion that it is largely run by a group with similar backgrounds and attitudes, loosely describable as “liberal progressives” and of course, I am one. I point this out quickly only because I know that others will. However, in common with the overwhelming number of journalists within the BBC and other regulated broadcasters in the UK, I leave my personal politics at home when I go to work as a producer and broadcaster, and have taken this position when approaching this report.²⁶

And he was also eager to explain his own relationship to the BBC:

Finally, my own knowledge of the BBC and many of the people in it spans four decades, from my appointment as a lowly BBC Graduate Trainee, through twenty-five years observing closely as a competitor, and for the last twelve years as an independent producer.²⁷

However, the phrase ‘independent producer’ is misleading to those unfamiliar with the processes of programme commissioning and development. While Mr Prebble was not at the time of his report a direct employee of the BBC, he was in a close working relationship with it from 2002 until 2011 as the founder and director of the Liberty Bell production company. In that capacity Mr Prebble was executive producer of a wide range of BBC programmes, including: Grumpy Old Men, (BBC1, 2003); Victoria Wood’s Big Fat Documentary (BBC1, 2004); Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time (BBC2, 2004); Three Men in a Boat (BBC2, 2006); My Appalling School Report, (BBC2, 2006); The Alistair Campbell Diaries (BBC2, 2007); Am I Normal? (BBC2, 2008).²⁸ Mr Prebble sold his stake in Liberty Bell in 2011.

It is also of note that although Mr Prebble was said to be ‘independent’ of the BBC when he was commissioned to write the report, the man who actually commissioned him, David Liddiment a former director of programmes at Granada Television, had been a close working colleague of Mr Prebble among the senior executives at Granada for many years.

Given Mr Prebble’s background, stated political views, and former financial and professional ties to the BBC, it is hard to understand why he was appointed to

undertake an 'independent' review of coverage. The evidence provided above shows that he did not do so.

Cardiff independence?

Stuart Prebble and the BBC Trustees apparently accepted, without question, the Cardiff research was independent. Whilst it is accepted that university departments often work for several outside clients and manage an independence of approach, the points raised above seriously bring into question whether this was achieved with this project. The basic assumptions, especially with regard to the right-wing bias they claim to have detected, would firmly indicate otherwise.

On this basis, Newswatch has investigated the links between the Cardiff department and the BBC. There are two very strong connections which are particularly noteworthy. Richard Tait, a former BBC editor, who was subsequently appointed a BBC Governor and Trustee (2004-10) is now a Cardiff Professor of Journalism. Richard Sambrook, who was BBC Head of News until 2008 (and hence during one of the periods covered by the research) is the director of the Cardiff Centre of Journalism Media and Cultural Studies, and is a Professor of Journalism. The research project was commissioned by the Trustees directly from Professor Sambrook. It is also of note in this connection that Professor Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (Professor Sambrook's deputy), who was director of the Prebble content analysis project, also worked recently for the European Commission on a report asking how the media were covering the idea of greater EU integration and why the UK was sceptical of that idea.²⁹

Justin Lewis, another Cardiff professor – his post covers communications in the media school – has contributed a chapter in a recent book edited by Richard Tait, entitled *Is the BBC In Crisis?* In it, he used the study conducted by his colleagues to argue polemically that the research provided evidence that the BBC is seriously biased against the left in much of its coverage – and based his conclusions on inaccurate extrapolations from the data. This raises questions about whether those from the Cardiff School of Journalism understand the need for rigour in the broadcast research process.

The Professor Lewis claims in detail

In the extract printed in *The Independent* in February 2014, Professor Lewis in fact used only two statistics taken from his department's research to substantiate a sweeping contention that there had been a rightwards shift in the BBC's output between 2007 and 2012. The first of these was:

... it is the imbalance between Conservative and Labour – by margins of 3:1 for party leaders and 4:1 for ministers/shadow ministers – that was most striking, especially since the research indicated that this rightward shift was a strictly BBC phenomenon.³⁰

But Professor Lewis was selective: he cherry-picked the most dramatic figures – the 3:1 and 4:1 statistics he quotes relate only to the most senior party figures in the survey sample and he excluded 95 MPs from his interpretation of the Cardiff 2012 data.³¹

Crucially, and as has been discussed previously, the statistics were drawn from a limited sample, which was emphatically not representative of the BBC's news output. In addition, the statistics employed by Professor Lewis were focused on news reports in only three areas: EU, Immigration and Religion. A wide array of key political themes – including the NHS, Welfare, Education and the Economy – were thus excluded from the sample entirely. Had any of these topics been included (and a number of these are traditionally where 'left-wing' commentary and debate is at its highest volume) then the ratios between Conservative and Labour could have been very different. In turn, Professor Lewis also ignored a raft of figures which contradicted his central hypothesis: elsewhere the Cardiff statistics demonstrated that EU Commissioners almost doubled their representation (from 18 sources in 2007, to 33 in 2012) and the number of UKIP sources declined sharply (from 8 in 2007 to 4 in 2012). Yet Professor Lewis made no mention of these other statistics, and, indeed, they were played down in the original Cardiff paper, with the suggestion that these were anomalies produced by the scope of the project, or of the 'dates or programmes sampled'.³²

The second piece of statistical evidence used by Professor Lewis was this:

The BBC is more likely than either ITV or Channel 4 to use sources from the right, such as US Republicans or UKIP.³³

Professor Lewis obtained this particular statistic from a section of the Cardiff research which analysed the full news output of the BBC News at Six for one month in both 2007 and 2012 and compared it to corresponding bulletins on commercial television. There were no US Republican or UKIP appearances during the 2007 period, and so his conclusion was derived only from the one-month survey period in 2012.

On further investigation, the dataset involved turned out to be miniscule. Professor Lewis's central claim was based on only six sources across the three programmes, a sample so tiny as to be statistically negligible. Furthermore, his assertion that the

BBC was 'more likely' than the commercial channels to carry right-wing sources was tenuous to say the least: As the table shows: the BBC News at Six carried two US Republican sources – the same (not more) than those appearing on Channel 4 News. It also carried one UKIP source – an identical number to those who appeared on the ITV bulletin.³⁴

	2012		
Source	BBC News at Six	ITV 6.30	Channel 4
US Republican	2 (4.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.6%)
UKIP	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.0%)	2 (1.0%)

The figures in brackets are the proportion of total political sources for that programme, i.e. UKIP's single appearance on the BBC News at Six equated to 2.4% of the 41 total political appearances. The data here is too limited to extrapolate to any wider point, yet Professor Lewis nonetheless deployed these meagre statistics as a buttress for his wider conclusion that the BBC's coverage favours the right.

Conclusion

These are charges of the utmost gravity, given that the BBC has relied on this Cardiff department to provide 'impartial' analyses of its news and current affairs output over a number of years, and Cardiff's work has been central to its processes of internal review on at least two occasions. This paper shows that the academics have made basic data-gathering errors, seriously misrepresented some of their data and used it to reach inadequate and highly questionable conclusions. Elements of their approach also create doubts about the department's neutrality, and seriously question the overall validity of its research procedures. The BBC Trustees have relied on this data to claim that the Corporation's EU coverage properly complies with statutory requirements. They are wrong to have done so, and this raises grave doubts about their competence in meeting their regulatory obligations.

References

- 1 http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/breadth_opinion.html
- 2 http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2013/breadth_opinion.html
- 3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Prebble
- 4 <http://www.news-watch.co.uk/?q=articles/2014/03/14/humphrys-%E2%80%98bbc-not-sceptical-enough-eu%E2%80%99>
- 5 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bbc-accused-of-political-bias--on-the-right-not-the-left-9129639.html>
- 6 <https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-how-biased-is-the-bbc-17028>
- 7 <http://www.newstatesman.com/broadcast/2013/08/hard-evidence-how-biased-bbc>
- 8 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/opinion/extract-how-the-bbc-leans-to-the-right-9129608.html>
- 9 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/17/bbc-leftwing-bias-non-existent-myth>
- 10 http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/breadth_opinion/content_analysis.pdf
- 11 Deacon et al (1999). *Researching Communications*. London: Hodder Headline Group. p.54
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 The correct way to sample, if only monitoring for 1.5 hours each edition of Today would be something such as: Monday, 6am-7.30am, Tuesday 6.30am-8am, Wednesday, 7am-8.30am. Thursday 7.30am-9am. Friday would overlap so 6am to 6.30am and 8am-9am. This means the full programme would be covered over the course of a week. (An alternative would be staggering their process at quarter hour increments.) Cardiff needed to ensure that fixed structural elements of Today were not skewing their findings.
- 14 An appendix to the Cardiff research explains that “the total amount of time one story appears throughout an entire programme was counted as one story. For a story to be counted as a separate news report the topic being covered had to be different”, whereas Newswatch codes each individual report as a distinct unit. The number of individual EU reports as opposed to those combined into a single ‘story’ are not shown within the Cardiff data, and so the two methodologies are not directly comparable.
- 15 <http://www.newstatesman.com/broadcast/2013/08/hard-evidence-how-biased-bbc>
- 16 The Cardiff methodology differed to that commonly employed by Newswatch in that it recorded ‘sources’ who contributed to news items in terms of direct appearances and indirect references within the texts, whereas Newswatch focuses statistically on direct contributions, but carries out qualitative research on the full transcripts of each programme item.
- 17 Wahl-Jorgensen, K. et al. 2013. *Breadth of opinion in BBC output*. Project Report, p.43

18 Idem.

19 Wahl-Jorgensen, K. et al. 2013. Breadth of opinion in BBC output. Project Report, p.49.
The 5% figure is a Newswatch estimate based on a chart published by Cardiff with no accompanying data table.

20 Ibid, p.45

21 Ibid, p.17

22 BBC, A BBC Trust Review of the breadth of opinion reflected in the BBC's output, July 2013, p.45

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 BBC, A BBC Trust Review of the breadth of opinion reflected in the BBC's output, July 2013, p.47

26 Ibid, p.21

27 Ibid, p.26

28 http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1590804/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1

29 <http://eurospheres.org/files/2010/06/UK.pdf>

30 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/opinion/extract-how-the-bbc-leans-to-the-right-9129608.html>

31 Wahl-Jorgensen, K. et al. 2013. Breadth of opinion in BBC output. Project Report, p.15

32 Ibid, p.17

33 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/opinion/extract-how-the-bbc-leans-to-the-right-9129608.html>

34 Wahl-Jorgensen, K. et al. 2013. Breadth of opinion in BBC output. Project Report, p83
(The table here is adapted from the original, to show only those sources relevant to the points made by Professor Lewis)