

Pointmaker

BIAS AT THE BEEB?

A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF SLANT IN BBC ONLINE REPORTING

OLIVER LATHAM

SUMMARY

- This paper uses objective, quantitative methods, based on the existing academic literature on media bias, to look for evidence of slant in the BBC's online reporting.
- These methods minimise the need for subjective judgements of the content of the BBC's news output to be made. As such, they are less susceptible to accusations of partiality on the part of the author than many previous studies.
- The paper first examines 40 think-tanks which the BBC cited online between 1 June 2010 and 31 May 2013 and compares the number of citations to those of *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* newspapers.
- In a statistical sense, the BBC cites these think-tanks "more similarly" to that of The Guardian than that of The Daily Telegraph.
- In particular, the number of articles on the BBC website mentioning a given think-tank is more highly correlated with its number of mentions in *The Guardian* than its number of mentions in *The Daily Telegraph*.
- Regression analysis shows that coverage in The Guardian is a much stronger predictor

- of coverage by the BBC than is coverage in *The Daily Telegraph*.
- Once we control for coverage of a think-tank in *The Guardian*, the number of hits a thinktank received in *The Daily Telegraph* has no statistically significant correlation with its coverage by the BBC.
- This paper then looks at the "health warnings" given to think-tanks of different ideological persuasions when they are mentioned on the BBC website.
- It finds that right-of-centre think-tanks are far more likely to receive health warnings than their left-of-centre counterparts (the former received health warnings between 23% and 61% of the time while the latter received them between 0% and 12% of the time).
- It shows that a higher proportion of left-ofcentre think-tanks than right-of-centre thinktanks are referred to as "independent".
- These statistics are consistent with previous studies which have suggested that the BBC has a left-of-centre slant in its reporting.

INTRODUCTION

The BBC is one of the most trusted institutions in the UK: 44% of respondents say they trust BBC journalists, which compares favourably to broadsheet journalists (38%), Conservative politicians (19%) and tabloid journalists (10%). This fact is even more remarkable given that these numbers were collected at a time when respect for the BBC might have been undermined by the revelations about Jimmy Savile and the resulting resignation of Director-General George Entwistle.²

Despite this reputation, the BBC is still frequently accused of displaying systematic biases in its reporting. For example, studies have assessed the content covered by the BBC's Panorama programme and accused it of having, among other things, anti-business, antimarket and anti-American leanings.3 As well as general accusations of "institutional leftism", the BBC's coverage of specific topics has come under criticism. For example, Peter Oborne accused the BBC, along with other institutions, of abandoning objectivity in its coverage of the merits of the UK joining the Euro.4 Similarly, Ed West presents a catalogue of instances in which the BBC's news coverage seemed to ignore or undermine voices opposed to mass immigration.⁵

Some critics go even further and argue that this slant extends to the entertainment output of the BBC. For example, a report from the New Culture Forum documents a number of cases of left-of-centre bias in the commissioning of entertainment programming.⁶

Given this extensive literature, the question is: how has the BBC managed to brush off such criticism and retain its reputation (at least with the wider public) for unbiased reporting?

One possible explanation is that much of the evidence presented in support of the bias hypothesis has incorporated analysis of casestudies.

One problem with the case-study approach is that, when examining the content of news reports, bias is inevitably in the eye of the beholder. A report on benefit cuts that focuses on the plight of poor families may appear fair and balanced to one viewer, while a failure to talk about the cuts in the light of the country's fiscal situation may be seen as biased by another. Similarly, the BBC's coverage of the royal family may be been seen as balanced by many, but anachronistic by others.

In order for evidence based on case studies to be persuasive, it is essential that one trusts both that the researcher is reporting the individual cases truthfully and without editorialising; and that they are not selectively choosing examples that support his or her hypothesis. Given that the public holds more trust in the BBC than it does politicians, print journalists and, one can only presume, thinktank researchers, these two requirements are unlikely to hold. Hence case study analysis of the BBC risks achieving little more than preaching to the converted.

P Kellner, The Problem of Trust, Yougov, 2012.

Although the BBC remains Britain's most trusted news provider, it should be noted that the equivalent figures in 2003 were 81%, 65%, 20% and 14% respectively.

M McElwee and G Gaskarth, The Guardian of the Airwaves?: Bias and the BBC, Policy Exchange, 2003.

P Oborne and F Weaver, Guilty Men, Centre for Policy Studies, 2011.

⁵ E West, Groupthink: Can we trust the BBC on immigration?, The New Culture Forum, 2013.

D Sewell, A Question of Attitude: The BBC and bias beyond news, The New Culture Forum, 2012.

Quantitative methods provide a way of mitigating some of these concerns. The pioneers of this approach in the UK have been Newswatch (previously Minotaur Media Tracking). They measured the level and content of the Today programme's coverage of the European Union during specific time periods and found that the BBC gave less coverage to European Union (EU) issues than the newspapers, and gave roughly twice as much coverage to pro-EU voices as anti-EU ones.⁷ Similarly, a quantitative analysis of the Today's programme's coverage of the 2004 party conference season found compelling evidence of anti-Conservative bias.8

However, despite their quantitative nature, even these studies still rely on subjective judgments as to which periods to study and deciding what constitutes, for example, a pro-EU or anti-EU voice.

To bypass these concerns, this report looks for evidence of bias using only quantitative methods that minimise the need for value judgements and which, for the most part, do not even require a look at the content of the BBC's reporting. These two approaches are based on the well-established US academic economics literature on bias in media reporting and focus on the BBC's coverage of British think-tanks on its news website as a way of objectively measuring bias.⁹

Crucially, the assumptions behind these methods can be stated upfront and be assessed on their merits: as long as they trust

these assumptions, readers do not need to be concerned that the results are driven by the author's ideological biases. Furthermore, because this approach is not as labour-intensive as those used in existing studies, it does not restrict its analysis to a potentially unrepresentative and short time-period: every article published on the BBC website since the last general election has been included.

Using these new techniques, the evidence of bias in the BBC's coverage lends further support to the conclusions of previous studies. As such, the results suggest that the BBC should put more effort into ensuring impartiality in its coverage.

This would of course be in the BBC's own long-term interest: the academic literature on media bias suggests that once a news organization loses its reputation for impartiality, its ability to influence the public is reduced. Once this reputation is lost, it will be difficult to regain.¹⁰

The BBC has recently shown a willingness to respond to criticism of its reporting. It recently published a review of its coverage of religion, immigration and the European Union, which highlighted a failure to give voice to a full range of opinions in its coverage of these issues. It is time for the BBC to show a similar open-mindedness to the problems of bias identified here.

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K Gygnell and D Keighley, Blair's EU-turn A Case Study in BBC Partiality, CPS, 2008.

⁸ K Gygnell and D Keighley, BBC Bias? Two Short Case Studies, CPS, 2008.

T Groseclose and J Milyo, "A Measure of Media Bias", The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Vol. 120, No. 4, 2005.

See for example: C-F Chiang and B Knight, "Media Bias and Influence: Evidence from Newspaper Endorsements", Review of Economic Studies, Vol. 78, No. 3, 2011. This demonstrates that only "surprising" endorsements by newspapers affect voter behaviour.

A BBC Trust Review of the Breadth of Opinion Reflected in the BBC's Output, BBC Trust, 2013.

USING THINK-TANK CITATIONS TO MEASURE BIAS

This paper uses the BBC's citation of thinktanks as a way of uncovering the extent of bias in the organization's reporting.

This is inspired by the work of Tim Groseclose and Jeffery Milyo, who constructed an ideological ranking of US newspapers by examining how often they covered each of a set of think-tanks in their reporting. In order to rank the think-tanks ideologically, they examined how often they were cited by members of Congress of different ideological persuasions during congressional debates.

The logic behind this method is that thinktanks which are cited more often in debates by right-of-centre Congressmen are likely to themselves be right-of-centre. Similarly, left-ofcentre think-tanks are those which are predominantly cited by left-of-centre politicians. Having identified the ideology of a set of think-tanks, they then measure the ideology of US newspapers by examining which think-tanks they give more coverage to. Effectively they use think-tanks as a "bridge" from politicians (whose ideology is known, or at least easily measurable) to newspapers (whose ideology is sometimes unclear).

In a similar way, think-tanks are used here as a bridge between the BBC and two newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, whose broad ideologies are well known.

An algorithm was then used to count how many articles each newspaper wrote that cited the work of each of a number of think-tanks. This allows us to construct a ranking of think-tank ideology that is both interesting in itself and broadly consistent with the existing reputations of most, if not all, of the think-tanks in our sample.

The BBC website was then searched to see how often each of these think-tanks was mentioned in BBC news articles. The hypothesis is that, if the BBC does indeed display a left-of-centre bias, then the BBC's level of coverage of the think-tanks in our sample will be closer to that of *The Guardian* than that of *The Daily Telegraph*.

DATA ON THINK-TANK CITATIONS

One potential concern with this methodology would be how to determine the initial choice of think-tanks. Perhaps some would say that we might deliberately choose left-of-centre thinktanks that are frequently mentioned on the BBC; and right-of-centre think-tanks that we know are rarely covered. To counter this concern we instead use a fixed inclusion rule: we began with every think-tank mentioned on the Wikipedia page "List of think-tanks in the United Kingdom". From this list we then excluded those that no longer exist (Catalyst), those with names that were the same as extremely commonly used words (Involve, Reform and Progress) and those which included special characters (Z/Yen, million+) that were not supported by LexisNexis, the database used in the press search.

This algorithm was then used to search the archives of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* newspaper and count the number of articles that featured the names of each thinktank along with the words "think tank" or "thinktank" between the 1 June 2010 and the 31 May 2013.¹³ To get the final set of think-tanks, those think-tanks obtaining fewer than 10 hits in both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* during this time period were then deleted. The result was a list of 40 think-tanks.

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The start date of 1 June 2010 was chosen to avoid coverage of the last election distorting the results. The end date of 31 May 2013 was chosen as the end of the last month before we ran the searches for the first time.

TABLE ONE: UK THINK-TANKS LISTED IN ORDER OF STATISTICALLY OBSERVED POLITICAL LEANING

 Demos Left-leaning Compass Chatham House Re-Define New Economics Foundation ResPublica Centre for European Reform Eklesia Royal Society of Arts Involve Nuffield Trust · New Local Government Network European Council on Foreign Relations · Local Government Information Unit · Global Warming Policy Foundation Fabian Society · Centre for European and Social Inclusion RAND Institute of Economic Affairs Legatum Institute · Centre for Social Cohesion Social Market Foundation Quilliam The Intergenerational Foundation CentreForum Work Foundation Bow Group · Royal United Services Institute International Institute for Strategic Studies Theos Politea Henry Jackson Society Adam Smith Institute NIESR · Institute for Fiscal Studies Centre for Policy Studies IPPR Centre For Social Justice CIVITAS

Policy ExchangeMigration Watch

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Right-leaning

A key assumption behind this analysis is that, all else being equal, news organizations are more likely to cite think-tanks who share a similar editorial line or ideological worldview. One way of testing this assumption is to rank the think-tanks in the sample by their relative coverage in *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* and then see if it corresponds with a common sense feel of which think-tanks are left-of-centre or right-of-centre.

The ranking on the previous page performs this check by ranking the think-tanks by the difference between the proportion of *Daily Telegraph* articles in which they were mentioned and the proportion of *Guardian* articles. High values correspond to think-tanks that were relatively more cited in *The Guardian* and low values correspond to those that were relatively more cited in *The Daily Telegraph*.

For the most part, the resulting ranking is consistent with intuition: Policy Exchange and MigrationWatch are identified as the most right-of-centre think-tanks in the sample and the Adam Smith Institute, Centre for Policy Studies and Bow Group are all represented towards the right-of-centre end of the spectrum. Similarly, Demos, Compass and the New Economics Foundation would be recognised as being in the "correct" part of the spectrum and a number of relatively apolitical bodies like the King's Fund and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation are found in the centre of the rankings.

The main outliers are the identification of the relatively left-of-centre IPPR, and the more apolitical NIESR and the IFS, at the right-hand-side of the spectrum. While such idiosyncrasies are not ideal, the ranking above is remarkably consistent with conventional wisdom considering it required no value judgements other than the uncontroversial assumption that *The Daily Telegraph* is more right-of-centre than *The Guardian*.

With this data in hand, searches for the same set of think-tanks were made on the BBC website over the same time period. Searches were also restricted to text articles in the news section of the BBC website. Because the BBC's search function was less reliable than that of the LexisNexis newspaper archive, we then manually went through each of the articles to check whether they actually referred to the think-tank of interest.¹⁶

Finally, some additional data on the think-tanks was collected. In particular, control variables were constructed which recorded whether or not each think-tank was focussed on a single issue or policy area (this was the case for 20 think-tanks in our sample) and whether it focussed on foreign affairs or not (this was the case for five think-tanks in the sample).

Note that it is the *relative* coverage which is important for our measure of ideology: just knowing that a think-tank is often covered by *The Daily Telegraph* is not sufficient to conclude that it is right-of-centre because it may display other characteristics that make its output newsworthy (e.g. it has a reputation for high-quality research or regularly hosts speeches by leading politicians) in which case it would also receive a lot of coverage in left-of-centre newspapers.

It is not unusual for these approaches to throw up one or two anomalous results while still delivering a useful ranking. For example, Groseclose and Milyo's work on bias in newspaper reporting, identifies *The Wall Street* Journal as one of the most liberal outlets in the US based on its think-tank citations.

Because we went through the articles on the BBC website manually there was no need to use the word "think-tank" as an additional search term.

THINK-TANK CITATIONS: RESULTS

Correlations

Armed with data on the think-tank citations of *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the BBC, the simplest approach is to examine whether the BBC's citations are systematically more highly correlated with those of *The Guardian* or *The Daily Telegraph*.

Table Two below reports the coefficient of correlation between the number of articles printed in the BBC and the number printed in *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* newspapers. This measure of correlation will always lie between one and minus one with large positive values indicating a strong positive correlation (i.e. a think-tank getting more hits in the newspaper is associated with that think-tank getting more hits on the BBC website) while a value close to minus one indicates a negative correlation (a think-tank getting more hits in the newspaper is associated with fewer hits on the BBC). Values close to zero indicate that there is little correlation one-way or the other.

As can be seen in Table Two, there is a positive correlation between BBC citations and both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* citations. However, the correlation is systematically stronger with *The Guardian* than it is with *The Daily Telegraph*: the effect is present, albeit to varying degrees, when the sample is sliced up in various ways.

Regression analysis

Another approach is to use regression analysis to examine how well think-tank citations in *The Daily Telegraph* or *Guardian* predict think-tank citations on the BBC website. If it is found that citations in *The Guardian* have more predictive power than citations in *The Daily Telegraph*, then this would again be suggestive of a left-of-centre slant in the BBC's coverage.

The number of hits each think-tank received on the BBC website were compared using regression analysis with the number of hits received in *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* respectively. The results from this analysis are in columns (1) and (2) of Table Three.

In both cases, the number of hits in each newspaper is a statistically significant predictor of the BBC's coverage. However, the coefficient on *The Guardian* hits is twice the size of that on *The Daily Telegraph* hits. Taking these coefficients at face value implies that, if a think-tank received ten additional hits in *The Guardian* during the time window, it would receive around seven additional hits on the BBC website. In contrast, ten additional hits in *The Daily Telegraph* are associated with just three additional hits on the BBC website.

Furthermore, the R-squared values for the regressions suggest that *Guardian* hits are a better predictor of BBC hits than are *Telegraph* hits: a model which includes *Guardian* hits and a constant can explain 28% of the variation in BBC hits as compared to just 16% when we include *Telegraph* hits and a constant.

Instead of controlling for the number of hits in each newspaper separately, the third column in Table Three controls for both *Guardian* hits and *Telegraph* hits simultaneously. The coefficient on *Guardian* hits is almost unchanged at 0.68 and remains statistically significant. However, the coefficient on *Telegraph* hits changes dramatically becoming negative, trivial in size and statistically insignificant at any reasonable level. The results suggest that, once we condition on the number of hits a given thinktank received in *The Guardian*, the number of hits it received in *The Daily Telegraph* has no relationship with the amount of coverage it will receive on the BBC website.

TABLE TWO

Correlation Between BBC and Guardian/Telegraph Coverage				
	Guardian	Telegraph		
Full Sample	0.53	0.41		
(N=40)				
Single Issue	0.44	0.16		
(N=20)				
Multi Issue	0.64	0.61		
(N=20)				
No Foreign Policy	0.56	0.50		
(N=35)				

TABLE THREE

Regression Results							
	(1)	(1) (2)					
Dependent Variable	BBC Hits	BBC Hits	BBC Hits				
Guardian Hits	0.6628***	-	0.6771*				
	(0.2394)	-	(0.3856)				
Telegraph Hits	-	0.2955**	-0.0107				
	-	(0.1201)	(0.1646)				
Constant	15.9178***	** 21.7878*** 15.941					
	(4.7232)	(4.6485)	(4.7395)				
R-squared	0.28	0.15	0.28				
N	40	40	40				

- i) Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses
- ii) Specification (1) controls for Guardian hits individually.
- iii) Specification (2) controls for Telegraph hits individually
- iv) Specification (3) controls for both newspapers simultaneously

TABLE FOUR

Regression Results With Additional Control Variables						
	(1)	(2)	(3)			
Dependent Variable	BBC Hits	BBC Hits	BBC Hits			
Guardian Hits	0.6606***	-	0.5618*			
	(0.2199)	-	(0.3105)			
Telegraph Hits	-	0.3275**	0.0740			
	-	(0.1225)	(0.1410)			
Single Issue	-1.7401	-4.9138	-1.8459			
	(7.4946)	(8.0654)	(7.5750)			
Foreign Affairs	37.8376*	45.12088**	39.1707*			
	(19.7175)	(21.7771)	(20.3145)			
Constant	12.1126**	17.5017***	11.8395**			
	(5.3557)	(5.5922)	(5.3092)			
R-squared	0.41	0.29	0.42			
N	40	40	40			

- i) Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses
- ii) Specification (1) controls for Guardian hits individually.
- iii) Specification (2) controls for Telegraph hits individually
- iv) Specification (3) controls for both newspapers simultaneously
- *** statistically significant at the 1% level.
- ** statistically significant at the 5% level.
- * statistically significant at the 10% level.

Robustness checks

One might be worried that there is some other characteristic of think-tanks that is driving the results. For example, it could be that both *The Guardian* and the BBC share a greater interest in foreign policy issues and it is this that is driving the results. Table Four examines the robustness of the results by controlling for whether a think-tank focuses on a single issue rather than a broad array of issues and whether it focuses on foreign affairs rather than domestic matters.

As can be seen, the results are essentially unchanged: when we control for the hits in each newspaper separately the coefficient on *Guardian* hits has twice the magnitude of that on *Telegraph* hits. When we control for hits in both newspapers simultaneously, *Telegraph* hits ceases to have any statistically significant effect and the magnitude of the coefficient becomes trivially small.

Another concern might be that the results above are an artefact of the different media sources

giving more or less coverage to think-tanks in general rather than any one in particular.

To mitigate these concerns, the analysis was repeated replacing the hits for each think-tank in each media source with the think-tank's percentage share of the total number of think-tank hits in that news source. The results from this analysis are presented in Table Five.

Again the results are essentially unchanged: once we condition on the share of hits a thinktank received in The Guardian, the number of hits a think-tank received in The Daily Telegraph has no statistically significant effect on the share of hits it received from the BBC. Furthermore. the think-tank's share Guardian hits have much more predictive power than the share of Telegraph hits: the Rsquared value when we include the share of hits in The Guardian and a constant, is 0.28 compared to just 0.16 when we control for the share of *Telegraph* hits and a constant.

TABLE FIVE

Regression Results Using Proportional Hits									
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)			
Dependent Variable	BBC Hits (%)								
Guardian Hits (%)	0.5654***	-	0.5776*	0.5635***	-	0.4792*			
	(0.2042)	-	(0.3289)	(0.1875)	-	(0.2648)			
Telegraph Hits (%)	-	0.3389**	-0.0123	-	0.3756**	0.0849			
	-	(0.1378)	(0.1888)	-	(0.1405)	(0.1617)			
Single Issue	-	-	-	-0.1361	-0.3842	-0.1443			
	-	-	-	(0.5860)	(0.6307)	(0.5923)			
Foreign Affairs	-	-	-	2.9584*	3.5278**	3.0626*			
	-	-	-	(1.5416)	(1.7027)	(1.5883)			
Constant	1.2445***	1.7035***	1.2464***	0.9470**	1.3683***	0.9256**			
	(0.3692)	(0.3635)	(0.3706)	(0.4187)	(0.4372)	(0.4151)			
R-squared	0.28	0.16	0.28	0.41	0.34	0.42			
N	40	40	40	40	40	40			

- i) Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses
- ii) Specifications (4), (5) and (6) include Single Issue and Foreign Affairs as additional controls
- iii) Specification (1) and (4) control for Guardian hits individually
- iv) Specification (2) and (5) control for Telegraph hits individually
- v) Specification (3) and (6) control for both newspapers simultaneously

THINK-TANK "HEALTH WARNINGS"

Another aspect of the BBC's coverage is how it introduces a think-tank when outlining its reports or the views of one of its representatives. In order to inform the viewer/reader, news organizations will often caveat a think-tank's views with a "health warning" that makes clear the institutions existing ideological viewpoint or any vested interest it might have in the matter being discussed.

While such a policy makes sense in principle, it is interesting to see whether it is applied consistently by the BBC: in other words, does the BBC caveat the views of right-of-centre think-tanks more than it does its left-of-centre counterparts?

Because this section of the report requires a more in-depth reading of articles published by the BBC, the sample of think-tanks was restricted to those well known for operating across a broad range of policy areas, and relies on an intuitive ranking of their ideology.

To do this, a number of think-tanks which would be broadly recognised as left-of-centre were chosen: the Social Market Foundation (SMF), Demos, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)). CentreForum, the main think-tank of the Liberal Democrats, was included as were a selection of right-of-centre think-tanks: the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), Policy Exchange and the Adam Smith Institute (ASI).

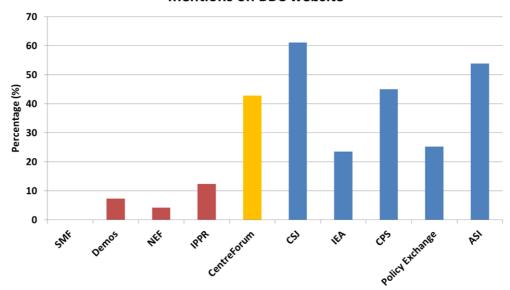
BBC articles mentioning these think-tanks were analysed to examine whether the think-tank name was prefixed or suffixed with any additional information.

To identify "health warnings" we looked at whether this information attributed the think-tank with:

 an existing position on the issue in question (e.g. "arguably the most vocal think-tank opposed to", "which favours a free market approach to...");

CHART ONE

Mentions with 'health warnings' as a percentage of mentions on BBC website



- an ideological position (e.g. free market, left-of-centre, right-of-centre); or,
- an affiliation with a member of a political party.¹⁷

Chart One above shows the proportion of citations receiving health warnings for the ten think-tanks in the subsample:

It is immediately apparent that the left-of-centre think-tanks in the sample are far less likely to have their views caveated than their right-of-centre counterparts. Indeed, the left-of-centre Social Market Foundation is the only think-tank in our sub-sample to receive no health-warnings in any of its coverage.

In contrast, right-of-centre think-tanks receive health warnings between 23% and 61% of the time. Even this lower level is almost twice the IPPR's rate of 12%, which is the highest value for any of the left-of-centre think-tanks in our sub-sample.

One might be concerned that this result is being exaggerated by the fact that two of the right-of-centre think-tanks in the sample (the CPS and CSJ) were founded by prominent Conservative politicians (respectively Margaret Thatcher and lain Duncan Smith) and this could be skewing the results.

Once the references to their founders are ignored, the proportion of health warnings falls to 14% for the CSJ and 35% for the CPS. These are still both above the IPPR's 12% of health warnings. The underlying result is thus robust to stripping out information about think-tank founders.

While the whole of the above analysis has not been repeated for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, a quick look at their use of health warnings for two of the think-tanks in the sample is consistent with the idea that reporters are more likely to give health warnings to sources whose views they disagree with:

- the left-of-centre think-tank Demos received a health warning from The Guardian 4% of the time and from The Daily Telegraph 20% of the time.
- the CPS received a health warning 71% of the time from The Guardian and 22% of the time from The Daily Telegraph.¹⁸

The flip-side of looking at health warnings is to examine how often each think-tank's views are reinforced with adjectives that make the think-tank's analysis seem impartial and hence more reliable. In practice, the only positive adjective used by the BBC when referring to any of these ten think-tanks is the word "independent". The proportion of citations for which this word is used is shown in Chart Two.

Three of the four left-of-centre think-tanks in our subsample were referred to as independent at least once by the BBC. In contrast, only one right-of-centre think-tank (the CSJ) received the same treatment. However, it should also be noted that references to the CSJ's independence were often accompanied by references to lain Duncan Smith's role as founder of the CSJ.

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When doing this we typically required that the party membership be stated explicitly, but made exception if the person in question was extremely well known.

Note that some of the health-warnings the CPS received from *The Daily Telegraph* may not have been intended as such (e.g. "The Iron Lady's favourite think-tank...").

IMPLICATIONS

One obvious retort to these results is: who cares? Do we really believe that whether or not a think-tank's report is caveated by the BBC makes the slightest difference to people's political views?

The answer to this is two-fold. First, the manner in which sources are introduced does matter. The BBC is the main source of information for a large number of British people. If it systematically undermines the statements of right-of-centre voices while reinforcing those of left-of-centre voices then this is likely to have an effect on public outlook.

Second, even if the health warnings given to think-tanks are not of huge practical importance in themselves, two possible explanations for how these results come about both have negative implications for other aspects of the BBC's reporting.

One potential explanation is that the selective citations/health warnings are intentional: in this case, the BBC is deliberately slanting its coverage by undermining the views of think-

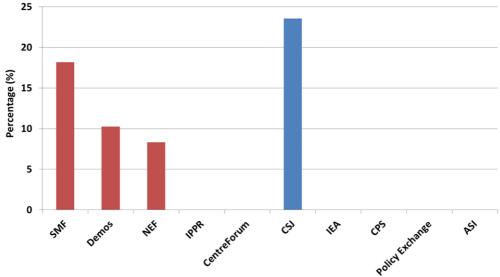
tanks whose views it, or its employees, finds disagreeable. This would suggest that other areas of coverage could be subject to similar biases with negative implications for the reliability of the BBC's reporting.

A second explanation is that the asymmetric use of health warnings is unintentional: in this case, BBC journalists genuinely believe left-of-centre think-tanks to be more reliable and less ideological than their right-of-centre counterparts and feel that they should pass on this information to viewers. Unfortunately, this too has implications for other aspects of the BBC's coverage because it suggests that they are unable to recognise their own biases and so cannot be relied upon to provide accurate reporting to viewers, listeners or readers.

These results, particularly when viewed in conjunction with the existing evidence, suggest that the BBC needs to seriously examine whether it is meeting the high standards of impartiality it sets itself.

CHART TWO





WHAT MIGHT BE BEHIND BBC BIAS?

The most common explanation given for the perceived biases in the BBC's coverage is that the BBC suffers from "group think": its employees are a culturally homogenous group that thinks in a certain way and this is reflected in its output.

This explanation is supported by a number of the corporation's former and current employees. For example, former newsreader Peter Sissons argues the organization has a left-of-centre mindset which informs its thinking and results in a, perhaps unintentional, left-of-centre bias. This diagnosis is echoed by Andrew Marr, who dismissed accusations of party political bias, but admitted that there was an "innate liberal bias" at the BBC. 20

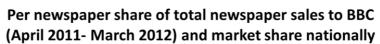
Similarly, the writer Anthony Jay, describes his experience as a BBC producer as one in which "We so rarely encountered any coherent

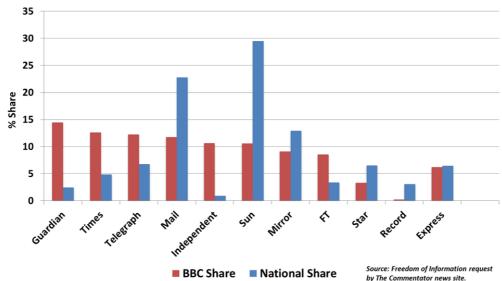
opposing arguments that we took our group-think as the views of all right-thinking people". 21

One piece of empirical evidence which supports the idea that the BBC's staff are both remarkably homogenous and unrepresentative of the general population is its purchase of national newspapers as analysed by *The Commentator* website. These are presented in Chart Three below.

Although one would not expect the purchases to be exactly representative of the general population, the overrepresentation of *The Guardian* and *The Independent* newspapers is striking and suggestive of a certain prevailing culture at the BBC.

CHART THREE





¹⁹ P Sissons, "Left-wing bias? It's written through the BBC's very DNA", *The Daily Mail*, 2011.

^{20 &}quot;Does the BBC Have a Bias Problem?", BBC News, 2007.

A Jay, *Confessions of a Reformed BBC Producer*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2007.

CONCLUSIONS

This quantitative analysis of think-tank citations and the use of "health warnings" is consistent with existing evidence that the BBC exhibits a left-of-centre slant in its online reporting (further analysis of this issue could extend these techniques to examine television and radio coverage).

Although the effects measured may seem trivial at first glance (who, apart from the think-tanks themselves, really cares if the IPPR is more likely to be referred to as "independent" than the Centre for Policy Studies?), they could be indicative of a wider problem in areas of reporting where slant is harder to measure.

And this is surely an issue which the BBC should take seriously. A good starting point would be for the BBC to follow up its recent study on the breadth of its coverage of different views on Europe, immigration and religion with another that examines the issue of breadth of coverage more generally and also looks at whether the BBC is sufficiently impartial in its introduction and comment on these different viewpoints. Should impartiality just mean having opposing views represented? Or should it also take account of how these views are introduced?

With this in mind the BBC should take steps to implement the recommendations of the BBC Trust report. In addition, the BBC should follow up its previous study with a more wide-ranging investigation that looks at both the *level* of coverage given to voices from across the political spectrum, and also the *manner* in which these voices are presented. The BBC should ask itself two questions: is it prepared to admit the possibility of the existence of an institutionally left-of-centre bias? If so, how will the new Director of News, James Harding, respond to the challenge this implies?



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THE AUTHOR

Dr. Oliver Latham holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Cambridge where he was also a teaching fellow in Public Economics. His doctoral thesis *The Political Economy of Mass Media and Intelligence* used econometric techniques to detect bias in information transmission, with an application to British newspaper reporting. He graduated with first class honours in Economics and Econometrics from the University of Bristol and also holds an MPhil in Economics with distinction from the University of Cambridge. He has been awarded a Junior fellowship of the Royal Economic Society and a Munro Studentship at Queens' College Cambridge.

He has previously co-authored a pamphlet with Lord Flight, *The Case against CGT* (Centre for Policy Studies, 2012).

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