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An opportunity born of a media storm? Bringing the public's voice into the debate about the BBC's future

LSE's Professor Lee Edwards and the University of Leeds' Dr Giles Moss reflect on recent accusations and resignations at the BBC in light of their research into citizens' assemblies and make a case for the value of public input.

The **resignations** on 9 November of Tim Davie, Director General of the BBC, and Deborah Turness, the corporation's Head of News, in response to poor editing of a Donald Trump speech shown in a Panorama documentary, have created a media storm. Commentators, journalists and politicians across the media have pursued the story in great detail, and indeed it has some perfect headline-grabbing ingredients. The BBC is the UK's most significant media organisation: its flagship public service broadcaster, a source of enviable industry expertise, and a key locus of investment in media innovation. It has a **national** and **international** reputation for high-quality news and content. Yet, even with these material and reputational assets, it has come under fire for an editorial decision that seems to go against its principles of impartiality.

This latest scandal not only suggests the possibility of repeated failings in process and practice in the institution. Some coverage has also suggested political machinations within the organisation, going back to **appointments** from the Boris Johnson era of politics. Suggestions of a '**coup**' began circulating widely the day after the resignations (although they were dismissed by the Chair of the BBC Board, Samir Shah, on Radio 4's 'The World at One' on Monday 10th November). The fact that events have handed President Donald Trump an opportunity to criticise the institution on social media, and **threaten legal action**, only increases the news value of the story.

All these details are important in understanding the reasons why an editing failure has produced such huge fallout – and this in spite of internal action having already been taken in relation to the failure, as Samir Shah's **letter of apology** outlined. The BBC now has the huge challenge of finding two senior leaders, capable of leading the organisation through not only this crisis, but also through

the BBC's **Charter Review**, which will determine its funding and governance arrangements for the next decade.

Clearly, the institutional challenges for the corporation are huge. However, creating a little distance from immediate events permits a broader view of what could be learned, from this case as well as from **previous scandals** that the BBC has experienced recently.

What we can learn

First, and perhaps most obviously, the politicisation of the BBC is a crucial concern, for both its supporters and those who oppose it. It can lead to bias, and it can **endanger impartiality**. Today, however, it is clear that achieving impartiality in a more polarised political context than we have known in generations, is more **difficult**.

In a **citizens' assembly** we conducted with members of the public in 2020, the difficulty of the current context was recognised. While the value of public service broadcasting as a source of trusted news was clear, our participants also noted that the closeness of the BBC to political and economic elites had the potential to undermine its credibility, raising questions about its capture by different constituencies. Clearly, this is something the BBC must pay heed to; but so must politicians. When the BBC is treated as a political football, the public may perceive it as *more* connected to interfering elites, rather than less, ultimately undermining its credibility.

The second lesson follows on from the first: if the BBC's public service mission is not to fall prey to political interests, then enhancing its accountability to the public is crucial. In the current coverage, rebuilding trust in the BBC is a major theme – as in suggestions that the BBC must **'restore trust'** with its audiences. The most recent **Ofcom review** confirmed that it remains one of the country's most trusted broadcasters. Certainly, trust is vital, but in our research, *accountability* to the public encompassed much more. This included having a say in the way the BBC is run, ensuring that there was proper representation of its publics in production and technical roles as well as on-screen, and being more transparent about the decisions it makes.

These proposals emerged from participants' in-depth and informed discussions about what public service media should and could look like in the future. They are focused on making space for the public, and those who represent them, in governance structures and strategic, as well as shorter-term, decision-making processes. In other words, accountability – including rebuilding trust – cannot be a knee-jerk response to this particular story. It has to be part of a longer-term plan to involve the public in consequential decisions about how the BBC operates.

This idea is not new – the BBC used to have **audience councils** across the UK, that advised the BBC Trust until they ceased to exist in 2017. Yet since then, public input has too often taken the form of surveys, market research, or subject-specific consultations, where the outcome of participation is limited and / or remains opaque. This keeps the public at arms' length from the BBC in areas that

really matter to them, and where they feel they should have a say in their role as the 'public' that the corporation serves.

The final lesson, then, relates to this role. While media coverage focuses on the immediate, paying attention to the elite political interests and internal machinations involved in the story, we must not lose sight of the wider picture. The BBC is an institution that serves the public, often extremely well – but it does not involve them enough in its operations and decision-making.

The value of public input

The intense public debate about the editorial decisions taken by the Panorama team and the resignations of Davie and Turness, reflects how the public tend to hold the BBC to higher standards and feel a sense of ownership over it. Our research showed that there is energy and enthusiasm among the public for more involvement in its operations. Exactly how to make it happen is of course a more complicated question. But the BBC Charter Review is imminent, and is an unmatched opportunity to explore options with the public, findings ways to redress the balance of power between the BBC, elites, and its audiences. A Charter Review that values this kind of public input could ensure the corporation is held accountable for editorial and other mistakes by the public – not after the fact, but as processes unfold, and perhaps even before mistakes are made.

As Tim Davie said in his [letter of resignation](#): we need a wider public discussion about the BBC. That discussion should address its current role, management and governance, and lead to longer-term, ongoing involvement of the public. Only this kind of engagement will deliver genuine accountability and foster warranted trust in this most consequential media organisation.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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