



Damian Tambini

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## Trump's attack on the BBC is an opportunity to modernise the corporation

*Trump's threat to sue the BBC over a misleading edit of his speech feeds into narratives of political bias at the corporation. **Damian Tambini** argues that the besides the question over systemic bias, there is a broader problem at hand with the form of accountability of the BBC: towards UK governments rather than the general public. This is an opportunity for reform and for establishing the BBC's proper and full independence from UK governments and party-political influence.*

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The BBC faces a crisis: not only because it spliced together sections of [Trump's speech](#), thereby suggesting that he directly incited an insurrection, but also because when an internal investigation reported this, the response of the organisation was to downplay the problem.

As a PR response this is understandable: managers likely hoped this terrible breach of professional ethics would go away. But in such cases, the cover up exacerbates the problem. If the government confirms this "one rotten apple" defence, rather than grasping the nettle of reform, meddling in BBC affairs will continue to undermine the corporation, its funding model and its role in our democracy. If something positive is to be salvaged from this crisis, the government must spark a debate about how to reform the corporation.

## We need an *independent* inquiry that covers new tech in editing

The first stage should be a narrowly drawn independent inquiry into what happened, reporting in time for Charter Review. Whilst Trump's speech may have been shortened clumsily, this may or may

not have been deliberate and it may or may not be indicative of systemic bias.

If as Trump is threatening, there is a **libel trial**, this is likely to focus on intent and malice, so an inquiry will have to take account of this and could provide evidence on whether carelessness – rather than deliberate or systemic bias – may explain the edits. Evidence that not only Panorama, but the BBC's other flagship current affairs show; **Newsnight** made an identical error, seems to point to more systematic bias, but there may be an explanation for this. The programmes may have been made using the same archive for example. Given recent allegations that political appointments have placed **partisan spies within the BBC**, and that these may have been responsible for the **leaked review** that conflated a range of issues for example relating to reporting on Gaza, only a full independent investigation can clear up the issues.



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The inquiry should also look at technology. Those old enough to remember analogue TV know that edited TV films were often punctuated with jolting edits that could reveal the craft of editing long speeches for short slots. We don't see these clunky edits anymore because digital editors smooth over the joins to improve user experience. Some of these functions are automated, and whilst improving user experience and newsroom efficiency, these tools can also mislead. Automation is happening amid conflicting pressures: to create faster, cheaper, more compelling and attractive content on one hand – and maintain journalism values of accuracy and transparency on the other.

This is not something that can be grasped through internal reviews on bias, or by the existing Ofcom **reviews of public service broadcasting**. These technocratic exercises, constrained as they are by the Communications Act and Ofcom impartiality can only provide incremental technical suggestions. What is needed should be underpinned by the authority that Parliament and accountability to the public can provide – and direct public involvement, for example through a citizens assembly process.

# Time is ripe for deeper reform of BBC governance

I have **argued over several years** that the BBC should be empowered to protect its independence from government interference legally. Endemic **claims of bias** and governance failures from Savile to Edwards point to a need to strengthen accountability not to politicians, but to users. The BBC should be answerable not to any political faction, but only to the British public and the higher values of truth, accuracy and impartiality. This means genuine accountability to the public. Not more accountability to Parliament, Government, or a regulator.

With this in mind, the **Media Reform Coalition** has implored the government to hold citizen assemblies to determine the future of the BBC. I agree. This can be a useful part of the Charter Review process. But we also need to think about the role of citizen oversight in the permanent governance of the BBC. This is not about reinventing the **audience councils** of the past: the BBC could use sortition to recruit a representative body of BBC viewers, users and listeners, and give them a real say in decision-making about BBC services.

## Governance reform alone cannot fix this

The last Government seems to have taken the view that the answer to bias is to appoint partisans to the **BBC board**. This only compounded the problem. The BBC should be given the legal means to protect itself from such pressures by strengthening protections in the Agreement and the Charter, which currently sets out duties of the BBC to its audience, but not duties of the government not to interfere. Legal definitions of independence from government interference must now be strengthened.

Civil society organisation The **British Broadcasting Challenge** is among an increasing number of organisations that argue that the Corporation should be awarded a permanent Charter, and that renewal itself is not the appropriate mechanism for accountability. The last charter gave Ofcom a small role in BBC oversight. The next should expand this.

And government should be deprived of the tools to control the BBC board. Currently, 5 out of 14 board members are appointed by Ministers. The Commissioner for public appointments oversees the process and ensures that party loyalties are balanced across the board. This is not enough. There is a strong argument for disqualifying parliamentarians, donors and party activists from serving on the BBC board.

Article 3 of the BBC **Charter** places obligations on the BBC to be independent but does not place an obligation on others not to interfere with it. Article 20 (2) obliges members of the board to protect the independence of the board including by “neither seeking nor taking instructions from

Government Ministers”. If it could be proven that Boris Johnson appointee Robbie Gibb or another board member had been instructed by the former Prime Minister there could be legal action to remove him, but that would be hard to prove, and in general these protections are flimsy.



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It is often neglected, but the real constraints on what the government should do with the BBC are to be found in the [Agreement](#) – the document that accompanies the Charter. Article 4 of the agreement commits both the BBC and the government to the independence of the BBC. As an agreement that potentially binds both parties, this could quite easily be amended to make clear that both parties are responsible to respect independence and what happens (for example to the security of tenure of board members of the BBC) if either party is found to have breached the agreement.

## This is also about internal pluralism at the BBC

There also needs to be a debate about what kind of BBC will work in our less deferent, more polarised century. The wider campaign from the press and particularly the Daily Telegraph and spectator has focused on “metropolitan” and “woke” bias at the BBC, which raises questions of BBC editorial guidance and news management across the Corporation.

Some of this could be addressed by encouraging distinctiveness of editorial approaches across different BBC channels and services. This is about editorial guidelines and more direct accountability to audiences, but it is also about people. The director general role is widely seen as impossible: should it be split into two separate roles, editorial and management. The unitary board combines governance and management and should similarly be split.

But there is an opportunity here also to think again about the structure of the corporation. Part of the solution has to be a rethinking of the internal plurality of the BBC. Whilst the BBC has responded to increasing fragmentation and polarisation by launching a wider range of niche services, these

remain constrained by common editorial standards and policies, which are difficult to manage – recently illustrated when newsreader Martine Croxall was **disciplined for raising her eyebrows**.



*The opportunity for reform is now, and it must be taken.*



Some BBC standards – e.g. those relating to accuracy – are universal but others, for examples those relating to international coverage or identity themes, are less universally accepted and different BBC services can and should be tailored to different taste and demographic profiles. The balance between a universal set of editorial rules about key journalism standards, and more niche editorial guidelines for individual programmes, channels and services will strengthen both.

The BBC is a precious national institution, but it is not a fossil. It should be treated as a complex living organism: without constant review and development, it will ossify and petrify. The opportunity for reform is now, and it must be taken. 20 December 1926 was the date the first Charter was granted by King George V. Once century later we could witness a new constitutional dawn for the BBC. Let's make 20 December 2026 the BBC's Independence Day with its first permanent charter.

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### About the author



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Damian Tambini is Distinguished Policy Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. is an expert in media and communications regulation and policy, and active in policymaking as well as academic research. He is frequently called to give evidence to parliamentary committees and provide formal and informal policy advice to government.

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