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Independence and Politics

The coverage of politics often gets very fraught.

Especially at election times. The prize for the winning party is hands on the levers of power. And all UK parties and politicians say that what they want to do is best for the country.

But that passion in pursuit of power can be very potent. As can the passion in holding onto it in a world where electoral favour and disfavour can hinge on a run of 'bad' headlines.

It is unsurprising that 'they' (no matter who) will put pressure on journalists to secure the best and most favourable coverage, as seen from their perspective.

Independence

- Introducing Independence
- Video: Jenny Cuffe on Independence
- Being and Appearing Independent
- **Independence and Politics**
- Independence and Leaks
- Independence and Commerce
- Independence and Good Causes
- Conflicts of Interest
- Video: Kate Adie on Independence

Challenge

Journalists accept that. But it brings challenges as the PR people and spin doctors seek to persuade, influence or even bully reporters and correspondents, or their editor, into telling the story how they want it told and, if it favours them, at the top of the running order.

Or, conversely, not telling an adverse story at all.

Important links

- BBC Editorial Guidelines

Simply having made a call fairly, independently and based on the facts isn't always the defence it should be. But it's the best place to start.

Forewarned is forearmed

If you consider some of the most usual gambits from spin doctors before they play them, it might help you to ask yourself the pertinent questions to test your decision-making and independence.

Familiar gambits include:

'It's not a story' or 'it's a great story - I can't understand why you're not covering it'

This is always a tricky one because deciding whether something is or isn't a story is an art not a science. There are thousands of reasons why something is a story one day and not another.

But it is worth getting into the habit of taking a moment out to ask yourself 'why aren't we/are we covering that?' How would your answer sound to a non-journalist? Can you think of a better reason than 'it was a slow/busy news day?'

'You've misquoted/got the facts wrong/taken it out of context'

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If you've made a mistake, correct it as soon as possible. It's a sign of poor journalism, not independence, to stick to your guns in the face of the evidence.

Be open-minded - you may have inadvertently missed something.

On the other hand, you shouldn't give in to pressure as a matter of course. Look carefully again at the facts: check and cross-check them again; consider the quotes you used and the context you used them in.

If you're still happy to stand by your story and the way you told it - if that's your independent view - then say so.

'You should have approached us for a comment'

You probably should have done. If you didn't ask a significant side of any debate for comment then your story was incomplete, probably not impartial and possibly inaccurate.

You need to think of a good way to put the mistake right.

Of course, if you did make an approach and have the notes to prove it, say so. You may need to find a way of returning to the story to carry the comment - but you shouldn't allow the refusal of any party to comment on your story to halt or delay you.

'You've bought our opponent's agenda'

All parties think this. And though you may be sure that you haven't done so, it's worth taking a step back to ask yourself: 'Is this angle really mine ... or am I inadvertently leaning one way or the other?'

Of course, it is perfectly legitimate and proper to test the narrative of one party against that of another by asking questions based on the views or policies of an opposing party - so long as you make it clear that's what you're doing.

Notes, notes, notes

It's a good idea when you do have an exchange with a spin doctor or PR to make a note of the exchange as soon afterwards as possible, recording who/what/where/when etc and precisely the complaint. And flag it up with a senior colleague. Apart from anything else, the spin doctor may be trying the same tactic with other journalists.

It's a very common tactic - not always followed through - to threaten to 'take it up with the Director-General' or some such. When that happens, it is again a good idea to flag the conversation with a senior editor.

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines put the core principle like this:

> *"The BBC is independent of both state and partisan interests. Our audiences can be confident that our decisions are influenced neither by political or commercial pressures, nor by any personal interests."*

It relates back to accuracy, fairness and impartiality: getting it right in the public interest, not in your interests as a journalist or programme-maker.

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Independence and Leaks

Leaks are invaluable to journalists.

They're highly prized as the route to new information, known only to a few insiders. They can be a lead on an important and exclusive story or a story in themselves.

Of course, more or less everyone who talks to a journalist has an agenda. It may not be explicit and usually isn't malicious. But people who speak to journalists generally want to make sure that the journalist pays more attention to this or that angle or puts a particular gloss on something.

That's even more true of people who leak information to journalists.

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So, while every journalist should seek out contacts and sources and encourage them to speak, it's important to be aware of their agendas and factor that into the judgments you make.

'Why is this person telling me this?' is the question you should always ask. Not to find a reason not to report what they say but to be sure that you've seen the broader picture as well as to suggest ways to cross-check their assertions.

Getting too close to the person leaking information is as lethal to good journalism as not having the leaks in the first place.

Important links

BBC Editorial Guidelines

Briefing

'Briefing' is part of nature in politics and takes many forms - often presented as a leak to give it a veneer of journalistic credibility.

It may be an attempt to ease the way for a difficult decision; float a policy or idea to test public and media reaction; undermine an opponent (or colleague); or genuinely put something in the public domain that has hitherto been kept secret or which someone would rather wasn't widely known.

One person's 'briefing' is another's 'spin'. One person's 'leak' is another's press release by other means.

Audiences have become suspicious of political reporting that relies on 'sources' or 'friends of the Prime Minister/Chancellor/Leader of the Opposition etc'.

That does not mean, however, that an off the record or background briefing can't or shouldn't be used as part of a story or even as a story in itself - though you should remind yourself of the safeguards you need to

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put in place before using unnamed single sources.

You have to decide whether the positives of using the content of a briefing outweigh the negatives.

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Conflicts of Interest

Are you being totally honest about your personal interests?

Your editor and, more importantly, your audience need to know about any personal interest you might have that could be thought to influence what you report and how you report it?

For BBC journalists, there is a formal process in which they're required to fill out a conflict of interest declaration.

Activities which may present a conflict of interest include:

- non-BBC writing commitments
- public speaking/public appearances
- media training
- connections to charities and campaigning organisations
- political activities
- hospitality and personal benefits
- financial and business interests
- on-air talent and commercial advertising.

Appearance is as important as reality. You may be clear that your personal interest does not influence your journalism, but will the audience think that too?

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