

The Anonymous Cloud of Impartiality: how a football pundit exposed the hypocrisy of impartiality in the British media

Impartiality, as a concept, is inevitably clouded by the muddied waters of context. It is difficult to ever remain truly impartial, especially in a world in which a myriad of differing opinions constantly redefines where the central position lies, a complication that has been publicly exacerbated through the BBC's handling of Gary Lineker's tweet on Tuesday, which condemned the Conservative government's new anti-immigration bill. Following the BBC's decision to remove him from his duties this weekend in presenting 'Match of the Day' as a result, Lineker has consequently, yet unintentionally, catalysed a fierce media debate surrounding the implications of free speech and impartiality.

His tweet, posted from verified account @garylineker on Tuesday 7th March, was made in response to a video posted by the @ukhomeoffice Twitter account, in which Home Secretary Suella Braverman described the UK asylum system as 'overwhelmed', and thus outlines that 'stopping the boats is one of the five promises the Prime Minister has made to the British people'. This 'promise' means that 'if you come here illegally, you will not be able to stay' and that one would be 'removed' to other countries as it is 'unfair' that such people could 'game our system'. Lineker quote tweeted this video with the comment 'Good heavens, this is beyond awful.'

In a response to criticism following this tweet, he continued: 'This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the '30s, and I'm out of order?', the cause of the majority of the controversy surrounding him, on the basis of his comparison of Braverman's language to that of Nazi Germany. As such, he was asked by the BBC to step down from this weekend's (Saturday 11th March) episode of 'Match of the Day', in what has now curated a media uproar, less about the implications of Sunak's cruel bill (which has 'profoundly concerned' the UN's refugee agency, the UNHCR), and more about the implications of free speech, and the extent to which those associated with the BBC may be forced to adhere to 'impartiality'.

The key issue surrounding the BBC's decision lies in the implicit biases it presents towards right-wing politics. Emily Maitlis, former Newsnight presenter, invokes an argument given by Lineker himself at the beginning of the BBC's coverage of the Qatar world cup, highlighting reduced rights for women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and migrant workers who built the stadiums themselves. She evokes her 'curiosity' at the BBC's allowing Lineker to 'raise questions about Qatar's human rights record - with the blessing of the BBC - over the World Cup,' but not allowing him to 'raise questions of human rights in this country if it involves criticism of government policy.' A clear dichotomy is seen, whereby those confined to impartiality as a BBC associate are only confined by UK borders: from the North Sea onwards, seemingly anything goes. Perhaps it is not even the borders that confine associates, but Conservative ideals, as can be seen in other instances.

Just last week, The Guardian reported that an episode of David Attenborough's new series would not be broadcast, due to fears of backlash from Tory MPs and the right-wing press. The episode in question is the sixth of a six-part series, with the other five episodes being shown on BBC One at prime time slots. Whilst the episode will still be available via iPlayer, this serves as a blatant bowing to the pressure of lobbying groups, fearing the backlash of farming unions whose practices were to be called into question regarding their environmental impacts. The obvious argument will be given: that the episode is still available via iPlayer, and therefore is not 'censored'. The fact that this singular episode is not being shown however, is an obvious choice to reduce its viewership; Attenborough fans who watch the series' first five episodes in these prime time slots will potentially be left uninformed of the final episode, and therefore not seek out to watch it on iPlayer. That the idyllic beauty of Britain will be the resonant image of the documentary implicitly censors Attenborough's intentions, prevalent through his entire career.

Both Lineker and Attenborough have oftentimes been criticised for using their position to pursue a political 'agenda'. Much like footballer Marcus Rashford's call for free school meals for low income school children being met with a rally of 'stick to football', Lineker has been told he 'cannot any longer hide behind the fact that [he is] simply a football commentator' (Mike Graham, TalkTV host) and that 'The people who are paying Gary Lineker's salary are license fee payers and they do not all agree with Gary Lineker' (Nadine Dorris, former culture secretary). Such comments are inevitable, especially from right-wing media moguls, but they interestingly invoke the wording of the BBC's own rules surrounding figures' use of social media.

Point 15.3.13 of BBC social media protocol identifies the ‘potential to compromise the BBC’s impartiality and to damage its reputation’ if ‘public expressions of opinion’ are given by individuals linked to the outlet. It goes on to state however, that ‘the risk is lower where an individual is expressing views publicly on an unrelated area, for example, a sports or science presenter expressing views on politics or the arts.’

This leads us to question therefore, in the BBC’s treatment of Lineker, how much the corporation is interested in maintaining impartiality, and how much it is interested in maintaining Tory politics. Almost all of the public figures who have come out against Lineker, including the aforementioned Graham and Dorris, are Tory MPs, or right-wing journalists. Interestingly however, some figures deemed to be right-wing, or conservative in nature, have come out in support of Lineker: Jeremy Clarkson, and Piers Morgan, for example, have, admittedly in a tongue-in-cheek way, publicly showed their support. Craig MacKinlay however, the Tory MP for South Thanet explicitly called for Lineker to be sacked, and the Conservative party vice-chair Lee Anderson called for the BBC to ‘distance themselves from these types of comments.’ Whilst Anderson’s remarks focused on the content of Lineker’s tweet, calling Lineker’s invocation of 1930s Germany ‘disgusting and vile’, there is an implicit sense that it is not his language, but his attack of the Tory campaign that offends Anderson so greatly. Of course, politicians are not representatives of the BBC, and so should not be expected to maintain the expected impartiality. My issue however, lies in the fact that when Tory MPs and right-wing journalists compel the BBC so fervently to act one way or the other, it results in instances like the aforementioned situation surrounding Attenborough’s documentary. The BBC as an institution itself therefore, cannot retain impartiality, and consequently cannot expect the same from its associates.

More worryingly, the Director General of the BBC, Tim Davie, was once unsuccessful in running for Conservative councillor of Hammersmith in 1993 and was deputy chairman of the Hammersmith and Fulham Conservative Association in the 1990s. In 2019, he was the BBC’s highest paid executive, earning £642,000. Interestingly, in 2020, he appeared before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, justifying Lineker’s salary due to the value of his analysis to viewers; analysis he has now explicitly reined in, following Lineker’s condemnation of Conservative ideology and politics: ideology we can assume given his past, he wants to maintain. As aforementioned, BBC protocol suggests that if a sports presenter like Lineker were to give opinions on politics, it would have a ‘lower’ risk of bringing the BBC’s name into disrepute. Here, we face a situation where the supposed face of impartiality itself, has an explicitly political past; politics here, comments on everything, with this obvious conflict of interests affecting the BBC’s ability to retain impartiality.

Such biases can further be seen in more tangible ways, with pressures from influential right-wing figures also being applied in monetary terms. Alistair Campbell, who worked in a myriad of roles in Blair’s Labour government, exposed in a live BBC interview Karen Brady’s donations to the Conservative party whilst still remaining as an aide to Lord Sugar on BBC’s ‘The Apprentice’; as recently as the 3rd March, it was also found that West Ham United Football Club, of which Brady is vice-chair, donated £9,000 to the Conservative party in 2022. Ultimately, such given examples highlight that not only is impartiality difficult to maintain, but that the BBC can be seen as actively complicit in its non-maintenance within media, due to external pressures.

Ultimately, Lineker’s tweet and the resulting actions catalysed a media debate that exposed, in less than a week, the BBC’s inability, and actually its unwillingness, in pursuing impartiality for the British public. The very act of reporting on actions as those of ‘the BBC’, and the veneer of anonymity it entails, allows such purposeful incompetency to prevail. Going forward, perhaps thinking of actions as those of ‘Tim Davie, failed Conservative councillor’, or even ‘the BBC, funded by Conservative sympathisers and right-wing figures’ would remove this veiled anonymity, allowing a clearer insight into the BBC’s failed pursuit of impartiality.