

Review of the impartiality of BBC coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt.

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In April 2022 at the invitation of the BBC Board, we undertook to review the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt. A few points before we begin.

1. We've been informed by many pieces of evidence, and many conversations with many people, but the judgements here are entirely our s, so are the errors.
2. We use a wide-ranging definition of impartiality, which we refer to as broad impartiality (meaning inclusive). This is about more than left v. right politically. Bias can run in many directions, against many interests.
3. The work was long, but we tried to keep this part relatively short as we'd like it to be read.
4. Everyone we spoke to was helpful, thoughtful and candid, inside the BBC and out.
5. The material is vast. We had no choice but to focus on a few subjects. We hope

We

x We think, for this and other reasons, that broad interests that lack political salience can be

Findings in more detail.

One of the first things we found was surprise. Several smart people asked: 'Why this subject? It's a side-issue, surely?' Anyway, isn't it a bit dull, said others.

On top of which, most thought the output good (we agree). There was huge appreciation for its quality, seriousness, and especially the strengths of specialists. In all, not much to see here, some said.

That felt instructive. It suggests it's worth asking questions even if you can't immediately think of any problems. You never know what might turn up.

1. Framing and understanding

Here's a chart. It's about debt – but it's also about how the BBC can shape economic and political perceptions, intentionally or not.

The chart looks alarming, but the source is the ONS so maybe that's just how it is. We see

First, a lack of understanding. We suspect this is common and think it brings a high risk to impartiality and can lead to the appearance of bias. Journalists need to know what's contestable and why (specialists generally do), lest they take arguable positions and assume they're fact or that all right-thinking people agree.

Second,

The point is that looking at debt as a % of GDP can give a very different impression from looking at it in £s, and economists don't tend to choose £s. Then why did the BBC? In this case, £s make the rise in debt overall look far bigger, and also risk distorting when and how it grew.

Still, it did go up, even as a share of GDP. Did it go through the roof? Depends where you think the roof is. This too is fiercely contested by economists. As a % of national income, debt stands at about 100%. After the end of the Second World War it reached 250%. That is, different historical frames give a different sense of 'high' and 'low'. So why this time frame? Again, it tends to make things look about as bad as any time frame could.

A case can be made that 1946 is too long ago to be relevant. Anyway, 1946 was in the aftermath of a huge economic emergency. A counter case can be made that Covid and the global financial crisis were also huge economic emergencies, and that makes 1946 precisely relevant.

Perhaps alarm about debt is justified because 'equal to 100% of income' is nevertheless bad. Then how about 260%? That's about the position in Japan now. How about 450%? That's what many of us could borrow from a bank or building society for a house. But if you think 450% is worth it for you, why is 100% for the nation bad? There are plausible answers to that, but are the arguments heard? And bear in mind that, unlike you, the nation does not retire or die but expects a stream of income more or less forever, so arguably need never clear its debts entirely.

Maybe the debt is bad because debt just is. You'd rather be in credit than debt. But is it bad? It can be ruinous for countries as for people, but not necessarily. One consideration is what you're borrowing for. Another is that the alternative to debt might be worse. Many economists argue that debt can be positively good when it enables us to invest in productive capacity for the future, or if it spreads the cost of an economic shock (like Covid-19 or a war).

Our point is not to argue these views are definitive, or that debt is not a problem, or that more is right. It's to show why some people might reasonably think so. And some experts do think so. Others think UK debt too high, worrying that the trend is unsustainable, fearing an adverse reaction by the financial markets and/or a sudden and sustained rise in interest rates. They're anxious that the government should be seen to have a credible policy to stop the debt running out of control. These too are reasonable arguments. The simple point is that there's expert debate about the safe or sensible level of national debt, and how worrying it now is.

That being so, the BBC should beware implying a view. To us, this chart implies a view: 'it's bad' – maybe without anyone realising this is contested, perhaps in the belief a big, bad angle is better, *i.e.* 'It's bad, and right now it's really bad... great story!' If we wanted to present the data in the most alarming way we could, we might start with something like this chart.

Next, three framings of public debt to show the difference they make.

A)

Are we making too much of one chart? Or does the lack of understanding here go wider – contributing to an anti-debt stance generally? We think the latter. We found examples of excellent reporting, well-informed and even -handed. There's no question senior specialists know the issues. But we found other examples that still seem to lean towards 'debt bad'.

A description of the debt as 'eye-watering' is an old example critics still cite – a contested view, stated as fact. Some journalists told us they understand this now. Many external interviewees said the problem persists, and we agree. 'Busting the overdraft' strikes us as another loaded phrase we saw not long ago. A recent explainer said: 'Recent governments have pledged to keep the national debt under control, by which they mean it gets smaller over time compared to the overall size of the economy.' Whilst it's fair to say this is what recent governments might mean, it would be useful to point out that it's a contested interpretation of what 'under control' might mean to others. We've seen cash levels of borrowing described – debatably – as a 'record' ('record' or 'highest since records began' is a repeated irritant for all kinds of statistics. Not least, some of these records didn't begin long ago, and there are usually other data sources that could give a longer, better perspective – see, for example, [recent reports about the UK's debt](#) (a) (b) (c) (d) (e) (f) (g) (h) (i) (j) (k) (l) (m) (n) (o) (p) (q) (r) (s) (t) (u) (v) (w) (x) (y) (z) (aa) (ab) (ac) (ad) (ae) (af) (ag) (ah) (ai) (aj) (ak) (al) (am) (an) (ao) (ap) (aq) (ar) (as) (at) (au) (av) (aw) (ax) (ay) (az) (ba) (bb) (bc) (bd) (be) (bf) (bg) (bh) (bi) (bj) (bk) (bl) (bm) (bn) (bo) (bp) (bq) (br) (bs) (bt) (bu) (bv) (bw) (bx) (by) (bz) (ca) (cb) (cc) (cd) (ce) (cf) (cg) (ch) (ci) (cj) (ck) (cl) (cm) (cn) (co) (cp) (cq) (cr) (cs) (ct) (cu) (cv) (cw) (cx) (cy) (cz) (da) (db) (dc) (dd) (de) (df) (dg) (dh) (di) (dj) (dk) (dl) (dm) (dn) (do) (dp) (dq) (dr) (ds) (dt) (du) (dv) (dw) (dx) (dy) (dz) (ea) (eb) (ec) (ed) (ee) (ef) (eg) (eh) (ei) (ej) (ek) (el) (em) (en) (eo) (ep) (eq) (er) (es) (et) (eu) (ev) (ew) (ex) (ey) (ez) (fa) (fb) (fc) (fd) (fe) (ff) (fg) (fh) (fi) 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Let's hammer the point: this does not mean we advocate going the other way and saying debt doesn't matter , or that a government has carte blanche. Its choices usually entail risks on all sides. We're saying there 's serious argument, no more. To be impartial, journalists need to understand this . E

Note on household analogies.

That states don't tend to retire or die, or pay off their debts entirely, is one way national debt is not like household or personal debt, not like a credit card for example, and why analogies with household debt, or suggestions the government must 'pay off' or 'pay down' the debt can cause intense debate. Clearly, pithy, accessible metaphors are valuable to journalists and audiences. And 'paying off' is a tempting phrase even to those who know the arguments because it seems to express the idea there must be some degree of discipline over debt, even for a state. We just used a household analogy by saying mortgage debt equal to 100% of income would not usually induce fear. But again, it helps to know that household analogies are dangerous territory, intensely contested, and can easily mislead.

Note on hype.

'What's the best line?' is an old journalistic test of newsworthiness. But looking for the best line in dubious uses of 'record', or contestable framings for the sake of impact, d (l)-4 ((B)-1)-11 ((s

Likewise, 'crisis' is not just a good headline, it's a political and economic judgement .
Our

2. Political framing

Is politics partly responsible for what we see as a dominant set of assumptions about debt ? D

So where does due impartiality lie on issues of tax and spending when a community's politics are dominated by one political frame – for more public spending? Do we say the politics defines the debate by definition, or accept it can miss things and could sometimes be broadened? We think the latter (though we acknowledge the risks). Political attitudes in Westminster to debt have similarly converged again recently. More examples in a moment.

'The Westminster frame on things is the elephant in the room here,' said one senior journalist, who argued that the political angle of the day often determines coverage whether the specialist judges it significant or not. *'Once you set that ball rolling...'* said another, who argued that a Westminster announcement obliged him to serve up a predictable set of reactions. Correspondents in the Nations felt similar pressures.

We think the BBC could look beyond the politically salient framings more often, live up to its developing view that impartiality is a broad remit, be less predictably reactive, and give more licence and agency to its in -hop7 (o)--8.05 0 4ex(p7 pe (i)8 (-)Tj 0.004 Tc

3. Whose interests are missing?

Thinking about a broad definition of impartiality, one question we asked was 'are people's diverse interests proportionately represented in BBC coverage?' There's no perfect measure of that, but we think we can observe misalignments. What gets talked about can obscure big interests that don't, bringing risks to impartiality by omission. A striking example is VAT.

In Wales, more VAT is paid than income tax, ditto North East England. In fact, a large proportion of the whole UK population pay more VAT than income tax. For a great many households across the country, VAT is the biggest tax and so to them you might say the most important. More than one third of UK adults pay no income tax at all, but they do pay VAT. The table shows the dramatically different tax interests of selected parts of the UK.

Nation / Region	Income Tax	VAT
North -East England	£4.5bn	£5.1bn

'I think that is definitely true – the tax debate is way too income tax focused. And that's because the group -think is tax is income tax. So you're right in Wales, the North -East [of England] and others, the discussion on tax is skewed.' (*External*).

'Anyone who works in the areas of fiscal policy will think that people are overly focused on income tax.' (*Second external*)

Asked about this imbalance in the coverage of VAT, many interviewees went silent for a moment, then said things like: '*Interesting... never really thought about it. Yes.*'

How is it that the biggest number for a large proportion of the audience isn't seen that way? The one exception was a think -tank in Wales, which says it struggles to be heard outside Wales. We didn't look at council tax but suspect it's similarly underweighted for some audiences.

So does the BBC fail to show impartiality between the tax interests of people on different incomes, implying some matter more than others? Can this mean neglect of the tax interest of whole nations or regions where incomes tend to be lower? We think in this respect there's a case to answer. In general, the effects on different income levels of any tax change are well -reported – at every Budget there'll be charts and discussion about who gains or loses overall according to income (though we do n't tend to see analysis by Region – and we could). But the importance in this of VAT is neglected.

Below, the radically different tax interests of different parts of the population by income .

Source:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8513/> and ONS: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/theeffectsoftaxesandbenefitsonhouseholdincome/financialyearending2021>

(Note that the se two charts from the House of Commons Library use slightly different scales, so the apparent size of the blocks can 't be directly compared without reference to the scale. Note too that one chart shows direct tax as a share of gross income, the other indirect tax as a share of disposable income. What they do illustrate nicely is the variety of tax interests .)

You could say this relative neglect of VAT is because not much usually happens to it, but isn't that itself to accept a political *status quo*? It also raises the issue of how the BBC informs audiences about relevant background – which you might prefer to call education not news, which might in turn have implications for where the BBC does it. Education or not, it could easily find its way into an interviewer's questions.

Note that we have looked at these taxes from only two perspectives: income and place. You could also look at them according to age, ethnicity, gender... Broad impartiality between audience interests can be a very large canvass.

So it's again worth asking what frames the coverage, and again politics plays a part. When the UK government talks about tax cuts, for example, it does not usually mean VAT, and the media absorbs that framing without sufficient question.

Similarly, a political announcement about tax gets attention; changes over time that might affect people more, often don't.

'When the government made the decision to take child benefit away from a group of higher rate taxpayers, that got a lot of attention, and it was then made more generous to make sure ... it wasn't clawed away from as many people as that policy would.9 (C0i)9.9 (1)-1.4v]TJ 0.0

While there's no doubt the political frames need reporting, they easily dominate, and this is a risk to broad impartiality. In general, just because we include what blue, red, yellow, orange and green said this week does not make coverage impartial between the nations' varied interests.

'There are very few BBC presenters who will be brave enough to frame questions to a politician that aren't essentially articulating the views of another politician.' (Internal)

Another example which loses out for a different reason is coverage of public spending on buses. Bus travel is, for a great many people, all there really is. There are more journeys by bus than any other form of public transport, and these services are significantly shaped by public spending through concessionary fares, subsidies, etc. But trains and planes receive more attention. Why might that be, do you think?

News judgment is complicated, tries to satisfy many objectives, and we appreciate the difficulty of allocating scarce resources to the many claims for attention. The argument about the weight of politics in these decisions is an old one. Contrary to our own position, some think the argument largely settled by a few simple realities...

And of course, MPs have been voted for, journalists haven't.

We understand that point of view, we're just not sure it (w(,spTw 9.08 0 15fTw 3.73 0 Td [(s)3

4. Trade-offs

If the BBC has a 'debt bad' tendency, does it also have a 'spending good' tendency?
Some outsiders said an emphatic 'yes !'

'I have a slight worry that the BBC, when I think about

'The BBC, I think, is trapped in a narrative of every problem is solved by extra government spending or by new government policies. That is its broad narrative.'
(Third External).

Again, our own view about the right level of public spending is irrelevant. It's enough to say it's contested in every area, it affects different people in different ways, with well-established economic thought on all sides, while different governments and countries choose different levels and priorities.

And yet one critic of the BBC's coverage in this respect said it turned public spending into a shopping list, and another felt able to describe the typical BBC story about public spending like this: here's a vivid and emotionally compelling 'need', or 'failure', here's how much more money a few other carefully chosen countries spend on this need, here's how much better results are in those countries, therefore (it's implied) more public spending is the answer. He particularly singled out coverage of spending on the NHS. NHS problems, he said, are presented as spending problems, as are many others. If spending is the frame with which an analysis begins, more spending will often be the unsurprising answer the analysis produces.

Is this fair? Is it a bias in favour of public spending? Several people inside the BBC also felt there was truth in the 'spending good' criticism. We too saw examples that seemed to conform.

One answer we heard was *'But where's the political party saying: 'Cut the NHS?'* Another might be that the NHS has overwhelming public support; another answer to the charge that there's a 'spending good' tendency was: *'But what's wrong with that? More public spending pays for things people want – of course it's talked of positively.'*

Our judgement is that what's most lacking here is a stronger sense of the trade-offs. In practice, more for some often means less for others – either lower public spending elsewhere, or lower private spending because of higher taxes to pay for higher public spending. Once we acknowledge this, 'more' spending ceases to be uncontestedly positive or even neutral. It has positives *and* negatives for different people. The same goes for 'less tax', as neither is impartial between competing demands but favours the demand on the table. 'More spending' or 'less tax' can feel vaguely nice for everyone. But if 'more' is reported favourably, while

5. Uncertainty.

Sometimes, there's a fair degree of expert economic consensus. But often there's uncertainty. The data are uncertain, the arguments uncertain, even what happened in the past and why is arguable, let alone what happens next. A recent BBC Online piece 'Five Things We Now Know about the UK Economy' had us reacting: '*No, we don't!*' This doesn't mean we know nothing, far from it. Uncertain is not the same as ignorant, and economics can be a powerful way of understanding the world. In any case, no matter how uncertain, we must still make decisions. But it does mean there are no absolute authorities, that we can't always be sure what's going on or why, that rules are usually contestable, that policy is almost always arguable if only in degree – though naturally some arguments are stronger than others.

The parody of the job of a journalist, on the other hand, is to stand in front of a solid, stone building, shoulders back with the glint of authority, and impart: 'This, Huw, is how it is...' A parody, but the tension's real.

The risk of skating over uncertainty is that it can make one economic answer appear more certain, or obvious, or necessary than it really is. That is a risk to impartiality.

Just occasionally, instead of 'so you admit you don't know...?', as if every uncertainty were a sin, interviewers could ask a guest if they're claiming to know too much.

Journalists should reflect before saying what governments ‘can’ or ‘can’t’ do lest they imply endorsement of an objective, an underlying policy framework, or beliefs which are contestable. After all, the ‘rules’ frequently change. In short, you are allowed to question the premise.

‘Headroom’ likewise does not define the height of nature’s universal ceiling, nor ‘wiggle room’ its walls, they’re chosen measures of what the government of the day has decided it can do in the circumstances, given its policy choices and objectives. There may be arguments why one choice seems more compelling, but that’s not enough for the BBC to endorse it. What the financial markets do is a real constraint, but why they do it isn’t always clear or predictable, or a law of nature. Even a question like: ‘Do the numbers add up?’ can make economics sound like nothing more than arithmetic – when what they add up to may be a debatable choice.

All told, accepting the language of necessity about taxation, public spending, government borrowing or debt is a risk to impartiality. In any case, there’s a simple, richer, alternative to ‘must’ that emphasises choice and debate. We noted some excellent examples of this recently.

Two of the BBC’s most senior journalists volunteered separately how surprised they were early in their careers to discover that economists disagreed, and economics was not black and white. How many labour under the misapprehension that economic judgment is little more than arithmetic with right and wrong

7. Range of contributors.

Who else could be interviewed or consulted if we say political balance alone is not enough?

A recent concern has been that fringe views with little support are sometimes given equal weight to an overwhelming consensus on the other side. We agree this can be a problem. But there's also risk the other way, of accepting too narrow a consensus and excluding reasonable opinion. We don't want to miss fringe views that turn out right or interests with real weight, nor do we want implausible fantasists.

BBC staff think hard about their choice of interviewees. In most cases they're good at finding people to speak for diverse interests in health, education and all the other areas of public spending. But in economics we think there's a case for a small shift in the balance of perceived risks towards more breadth of expert view (this implies no opinion about subjects outside economics).

We mentioned a well-known academic who felt his views on debt were largely ignored during austerity, and who many might now say had a reasonable argument. Some think concerns about rising inflation were also overlooked until too late. Similarly, few people saw the 2008 Global Financial Crisis coming, and those who did weren't much heeded. The latter examples are outside our remit, but all highlight how easy it is in economics to misjudge the reasonable range of views.

'Due' impartiality partly means the BBC is not obliged to interview every outlier with an opinion for the sake of spurious balance (our definition, not the BBC's). But economics has previous when it comes to being overly dismissive and confident: *'A point which may seem a bit out there on the day... proves to be completely correct within three months or six months,'* one internal interviewee said.

'There are big issues that we bring to the table for which we're disparaged, actually, for a long time. And then suddenly everybody picks up on them and we're still not heard! So, once Ed Miliband picks up this idea, it's no longer an idiotic idea, it's

Is coverage of fiscal policy too often in a comfort zone? Does it use mainstream politics or other partial perspectives to set parameters of reasonableness which are too narrow? Does the BBC depend for comment too much on the usual suspects? Given the range of fiscal policy choices within Europe and the US alone, there's clearly a wide range of potential views, many of which don't appear in UK debate. Should the BBC be more inclusive, more open to dissenting views?

Where there's a consensus, it should be taken seriously; but a mainstream political consensus should not be mistaken for an economic one, and no apparent consensus should go without challenge. The consensus can be wrong; it might not be as consensual as it seems; it can change. So due impartiality should not mean taking refuge in consensus or the mainstream, or that serious critics are lightly dismissed or ignored.

This is doubly true in economics where the value of humility often comes up, given its inherent uncertainties ('The experience of being disastrously wrong is salutary; no economist should be spared it, and few are.' Mervyn King, former Bank of England governor)

8. Range of ideas.

Sometimes, more breadth means little more than a programme team asking an awkward question. *Newsnight*, to take one example, prides itself on this, and accepts it will bring controversy. While we don't think controversy for its own sake should be a BBC value, we do think there's sometimes a whiff of anxiety around certain subjects, economics among them. Might a streak of awkwardness in the name of broad impartiality help stiffen resistance to the many strong pressures towards conformity? Speaking of which...

'The newspapers are a big part of that. So, doing the early shifts, you're pick -33 t '04 Tc 11. (u)-5 ('2r b)

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Our unexciting view of other media is that they should be neither oppressor nor compass, but maybe, if you're lucky, one more useful voice among many offering a different view or a challenge.

On range generally, we note a comment by Faisal Islam, BBC economics editor, a few days after the September 2022 mini budget had been reversed. Most of our research was done before these events, so we can't dwell on them, but this highlights the issue: 'Ultimately,' Faisal wrote, 'it was not the actual policy in the mini budget that was the problem, it was the perception that Downing Street wanted to rip up the controls on the economy that had brought relative stability for a quarter of a century.'

We respect Faisal's judgment. We think he makes a careful point that can't be dismissed lightly – and say so regardless of whether we agree with him: '...it was not the actual policy... it was the perception.' Why do we find this so interesting? Because we think it will have surprised many BBC colleagues.

If so, why? Were they not exposed enough to that argument? Did they treat with impartiality interviewees who argued either side of that case? Or did they slip into a consensus that the problem was the policy itself which was simply naive? We haven't looked closely at this output, as we say, and we're aware some journalists tried hard to test the arguments, but we trust them to reflect further and bear in mind more generally that a consensus can be a bandwagon in all but name.

Clearly, you can go too far in both directions. Trawling for obscure views in the name of tick -box broad impartiality would be a recipe for bad output and contrary to the ideal it's meant to serve. But playing it safe, without curiosity for what the pack could be missing and saying that's just how it is

wants from its journalists, as this raises basic questions about what kind of news organisation the BBC wants to be .

‘There will obviously be a consensus, even if it’s subconscious, within the BBC. There will be influential, powerful people saying things and tilting and directing in meetings and everything else. ‘I think this is what we should be... zeroing in on, this is what we should be looking at, right?’ So that’s all, again, framing the nature of the debate and the discussion. And then there’s also what I would call within journalism itself sort of the unhealthy consensus which is there’s a slight pack mentality... And, again, that’s perhaps a safety thing ... you sort of feel a bit better because everyone else is driving the same thing. And it’s quite difficult, or you’ve got to be pretty confident or pretty on top of your subject to say, ‘Hey, let’s just step back from this.’ Now, there are

Note on transparency.

We’re aware of a BBC initiative to encourage reports to be more transparent about how newsgathering operates. Not a bad idea, we think, as it might help with impartiality . There are sometimes good reasons editors put content on air which some people find biased; the reasons could briefly be given . ‘Why did they do that...?’ ‘Because...’

Diversified content can be justified , as we justified it , by being frank that economics can be uncertain. You can let in a few more outlying economic views if they’re signposted, though there’d be little point if it’s only to scorn them (the treatment one outlier interviewee complained of).

10. Nations .

Again, one of the first things we found was warm appreciation for the quality of coverage by BBC teams in the Nations, for the specialists in particular. We feel they know the issues about their nations far better than we do, as you'd expect, and we found them reflective about impartiality.

In general, we think much of this review applies equally in their areas. For example, we heard complaints that some political framings can be limiting or distorting.

Overall, though, we have little to add that's specific, but there are one or two points worth noting. We made a couple earlier about Wales and Northern Ireland: that Wales pays more VAT than income tax, along with others, but has anyone else noticed? And that the debate in Northern Ireland is shaped by the limited tax powers of its assembly so that almost

The 'centre line' or political starting position came up often . Almost everyone we spoke to said Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland favour higher public spending than England, and one external interviewee said

Finally, we heard a lot of sensitivity to the language around grants and subsidies, but we're not able to say if the BBC is usually the source of this language or if it tends to originate in politics.

Arguments about 'subsidy' have bite because

And just to finish with one more observation of the journalistic opportunities.

'We're not very good at taking a step back and [saying]: 'hang on, that's six regions have done the story about buses, why are we not doing a big thing, pulling all that together about buses and then joining forces to do that?' And I think it's the same with those prison stories where you get the very nose up to the windshield, local version of it. And we're not stepping in enough to sort of say, actually, we can spot something bubbling up here that's got a sort of national resonance if we put some resource behind that. So I think that's the creative opportunity: is to pick a couple of

11. Audiences.

Audience research for this review by Jigsaw produced one striking finding: how many people said they struggle to understand fiscal policy and therefore the BBC's coverage of it – though we think it likely they wouldn't understand anyone else's either. *'Over my head'*, was a typical comment. As this was a qualitative piece of work, we can't quantify the extent of the problem, but the sample was recruited to be broadly reflective of the UK population, and while many people clearly *do* follow and appreciate the output, it's evidently a big problem. Jigsaw found comprehension challenges across the demographic groups. More confident participants typically had a background – education or career, maybe – that explained their deeper understanding, and these were in the minority in Jigsaw's research. This should unnerve anyone in the media who talks economics (it unnerved us).

It meant these audiences struggled to assess the impartiality of coverage because they couldn't fully make sense of the subject matter. Numbers were too big, implications hard to grasp, arguments hard to understand, terminology mystifying... No surprise this kind of news tended not to trigger partisan or identity sensitivities. Jigsaw found a relationship between low understanding, low engagement and lack of views about impartiality, all reinforcing each other.

Instead, these audiences looked for what Jigsaw called surface criteria, like tone of voice, or 'does the range of views I'm hearing seem one-sided?' Judgements about impartiality followed (again, our words): 'the reporting wasn't critical enough...' or 'the reporting was too critical'. Or they might ask: 'does the report include a variety of people? No? Then I have my doubts about it.' If it's about something they've experienced personally: 'does the reporting match my experience?' No? Again, a reason for mistrust.

We noted that Jigsaw described VAT as 'less salient and more invisible to participants' but also 'some were conscious of the impact on prices and costs' when prompted. That tallies with our own research – VAT affects them, they feel it, but they don't see it in the media. Income tax was judged more salient, again as we'd now expect. The NHS was the big exception, judged the most engaging sw(t)JTJ4e m51ffn,3 (.)

A question for this review is whether impartiality between the interests of different groups should include how accessible they find the coverage. We say it should. If the BBC agrees, that brings quite a creative challenge: how to mix much more engaging, explanatory background into its coverage of both economics and the political debate around economics. At the moment, a large part of the audience appears to feel that coverage of taxation, public spending, government

There was one general exception to these findings. In Scotland, audiences were more sensitive to the subject matter, more likely to map it to the Scottish political landscape, more likely to raise impartiality concerns. For some, this was related to their views about independence and the economic and fiscal implications (see section 10, above).

There's plenty more in Jigsaw's report about how audiences respond to the subject matter and its coverage in news and other genres . We've put the full report in the appendix.

'It is just finding a way internally, I think, for the BBC to carry on reminding itself of the range of different debates. And we don't take time out of our day because our days are always filled with just what's on the news agenda today.' *(Internal)*.

But there are also probably a few fundamental s, like where in the output you try to fulfil the broad impartiality remit , who reports what , what gets to be called 'news', whether you're in earnest about the whole idea of broad impartiality and thus how far you want to go with 'making the news', and how you deal with journalists' struggles with economics.

Another fundamental is the creative challenge. If we think the BBC is missing public interests and richness of debate in this area – which we do – a big obstacle to doing more is that a large part of the audience doesn't get it and doesn't relate to it . The BBC excels at finding new, engaging ways of covering old subjects once thought dull , niche, or inaccessible, so it shouldn't be beyond the bounds in this case. But it's also not as if reporters and programme makers aren't constantly asking themselves how to do it, so there's evidently no easy answer. But if ever there was a need...

But we also know that much of this takes time and money, and there are other things the BBC could be doing, and other pressures. We acknowledge the trade-offs – but they're for the BBC to judge.