

## Panel Impartiality Note

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### IMPARTIALITY

#### 1. Meaning of impartiality

The word ‘impartiality’ is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as: “treating all rivals and disputants equally.” In the context of journalism, impartiality has variously been described as:

- Objectivity
- Neutrality
- Detachment from personal views
- Absence of bias
- Balance
- Fairness and factual accuracy

In a changing world where people can express their own views through interaction with programmes, texting, emails, weblogs and message boards, impartiality is faced with new challenges. A ‘citizen journalist’, for instance, could take pictures on a mobile phone in Gaza, and some words and post them on the internet to be seen all over the world. This kind of opinion piece is subject to no regulation or moderation. But research shows that audiences still want and expect impartiality, particularly of the BBC.

#### 2. Impartiality and the BBC

***“Ensuring ‘due impartiality’ is the most important legal responsibility laid upon the Board of the BBC by Parliament”***

Michael Grade, BBC Chairman, 2005

The BBC has a clearly expressed commitment to impartiality and it is a legal requirement. The BBC Charter, Agreement and Editorial Guidelines enshrine the notion of ‘due impartiality’.

##### a) The BBC Editorial Guidelines state that:

*“Impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC’s commitment to its audiences... It requires us to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. It does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view.”*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/>

##### b) The BBC Agreement (with the Government) states that:

*“The Corporation shall do all it can to secure that all programmes broadcast ....treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality”, that “a series of programmes may be considered as a whole” but that “due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles.”*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/charter/pdf/agreement.pdf>

c) The BBC Charter states that the Governors shall:

*“Ensure that the Corporation and its employees and all programme makers engaged by the Corporation comply with the provisions of any code which the Corporation is required to draw up for treatment of controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality and comply with any code or guidelines”*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/charter/pdf/charter.pdf>

d) Ensuring impartiality is the responsibility of the BBC Governors and is one of their stated objectives. BBC Chairman Michael Grade said in his Goodman Lecture on The Future of Impartiality (May 2005):

*“Because the independence of the BBC is so important to our audiences, and because ensuring ‘due impartiality’ is the most important legal responsibility laid upon the Board of the BBC by Parliament, it's something that we, as Governors, worry about endlessly. We are accountable to Parliament and to the licence fee payers to make sure that the BBC's editorial systems deliver impartiality. It is something the BBC can never take for granted. That's why the Governors have commissioned a series of investigations into the impartiality of particular areas of BBC journalism over the past few years.”*

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/grade\\_goodman.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/grade_goodman.shtml)

The Panel