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Introduction

For a working journalist, especially one in the BBC, the theoretical discussion is not very helpful. It is essential to have some kind of understanding of what impartiality could – and perhaps even should – look like in practice, even if it is a struggle to define it rigorously in theory [...] It is true that it should be seen as an aspiration rather than a measurable goal. That it is a collection of characteristics rather than a formal definition. And that it will change over time.¹

- ¹ The nature and degree of independence and impartiality at the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) have been a source of debate throughout the organization's long history of radio and television. Impartiality is not to be confused here with objectivity. The former is more commonly used in British journalism whereas the latter is more widespread in the United States. Impartiality is to be understood as a sense of detachment and an absence of bias when presenting opposing viewpoints, whereas objectivity is concerned with picking out evidence and facts, and balance merely involves providing equal space to differing opinions. Communication theorist Denis McQuail categorized bias into five types but, as he stated, these are non-exhaustive.² Impartiality therefore cannot be described in absolute terms but rather as an aspiration, which requires normative judgments as to which elements to include in a given news story.
- ² The BBC quickly established itself as a social institution with a nationalizing function that has been contributing to definitions of the “*national community*” ever since.³ This has involved processes of inclusion and exclusion, which have played a decisive role in reflecting particular representations of cultural life back on the nation. Indeed, the

broadcaster has been expressing ideas about identity, nationhood and conflict ever since its foundation as a commercial company in 1922, at a time when the Irish Free State seceded from what was then the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. From the outset, the company's general manager John Reith insisted that it should be both a public and independent institution removed from government and corporate interference.⁴ He pictured a public service broadcaster answerable only to a superior cultural ideal that would allow radio listeners to be uplifted.⁵ This line of thinking contributed to the BBC being chartered as a public service corporation in 1927, following a report by the Crawford Committee. It was believed that the instrument of a royal charter and licence agreements were best suited to a publicly funded but editorially and journalistically independent institution. The concepts of independence and impartiality were inscribed in the BBC's first royal charter⁶ and governments from that time forth instructed the broadcaster to refrain from giving personal opinions regarding current affairs and public policy.⁷ Reith's legacy may be viewed as that of a public service ethos, the nature of which was already evolving by the time of his departure from the BBC in 1938. However, the charter also provided for a government veto power over programming and the authority to revoke the Corporation's licence. Additional sources of structural and financial pressure on BBC independence and impartiality included the government's authority to appoint the Corporation's Board of Governors and control over the annual television licence fee.

- 3 BBC notions of independence and impartiality have since evolved in practice against a backdrop of societal and technological change.⁸ The earliest interpretations of these key tenets consisted of simply airing government policy views and those of the Opposition,⁹ in a limited vision of due balance. The broadcaster's position was quickly tested as successive governments sought favourable coverage – albeit with varying degrees of success. Some notable examples include reporting of the 1926 General Strike,¹⁰ the crisis surrounding Edward VIII's abdication in 1936,¹¹ the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939,¹² Prime Minister Arthur Chamberlain's pre-Second World War policy of appeasement.¹³ However, the 1956 Suez Crisis is of particular interest here in that it demonstrates the struggles of the BBC to fulfil its mission as an independent and impartial broadcaster in the context of the Government's lingering attachment to empire. The emerging specificities of BBC radio and television journalism will first be considered in order to situate the Corporation's concern with independence and impartiality. Government attitudes towards the BBC will then be placed in the context of the British Empire's decline and the strategic importance of the Suez Canal. Finally, attention will be drawn to interference with the Corporation at the highest levels, particularly with respect to the Government's propaganda war at home and abroad in favour of military action.

The Emergence of BBC Journalism

[...] journalism matters because it has a uniquely privileged cultural status, placing it (and journalists) at the centre of public life and political debate ever since journalists first began to irritate kings, queens and popes in early modern Europe.¹⁴

- 4 The BBC has changed perceptions regarding the role of journalism and how the journalism of public service broadcasting can be compared to that of other media, particularly the well-established press industry.¹⁵ This may be explained in the context of the BBC's early radio history, competition with the newspaper industry and the

growth of Post-Second World War television. Journalism is considered here as an ideal-typical value system, in which the public service ideal gives practitioners legitimacy as gatekeepers and watchdogs. Indeed, the occupation may be seen “as a collection of shared but continuously contested values that define how proper journalists should act or at what they should aim”.¹⁶ The content and style of British journalism were predominantly defined by the commercial printing press until the BBC’s radio services began in 1922. The early twentieth Century had seen fierce competition within the newspaper industry, the rapid growth in circulation of the popular press amongst the working class and the advent of the modern tabloid format. By the late 1920s, BBC radio was hesitantly developing its own network of journalists and sources independent from those of the printed press, although it was only in 1934 that the Corporation founded a news department. BBC radio thus gradually sought to distinguish itself from the so-called sensationalism of mass-circulation printed press by forging “its own notions of taste, tact and propriety”.¹⁷

- 5 Early television news, in turn, was influenced by BBC radio journalism in both form and style. This was demonstrated in 1954 by the Corporation’s first televised news bulletin, which was mostly made up of a still image and voice-only narration.¹⁸ The decision by Winston Churchill’s Conservative government to allow commercial broadcasting in 1955 marked the end of the BBC’s monopoly over the small screen and acted as a catalyst for an era of greater competition in television news production. The BBC sought to respond to newly founded *Independent Television* (later renamed ITV) and its particular brand of journalism, which was aimed at increasing ratings. *Independent Television News* (ITN) strategies included vox pops and a more adversarial journalistic approach when interviewing politicians. In this respect, post-Second World War media history can “be seen very largely as a process of adjustment by and to TV”.¹⁹ In the 1960s, BBC television news would go on to be strengthened with the founding of the *Ten O’Clock News*, a daily news and current affairs programme, which included fact and comment. The BBC was praised for its espousal of public service broadcasting principles as demonstrated by the 1962 report of the parliamentary Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting. The report was critical of ITV’s focus on ratings and concluded that there was an “overwhelming mass of disinterested opinion” regarding commercial broadcasting.²⁰ Legal commercial radio would not begin until 1973.
- 6 Limits to the BBC’s independence were perhaps most readily accepted at an institutional level during the Second World War, as national survival and victory took primacy and propaganda was considered an invaluable tool. In particular, the war showed the key role played by overseas broadcasting.²¹ BBC radio news programmes were paramount for morale on the home front but also for rallying troops and allies abroad. However staunchly the Corporation claimed to defend its editorial and political independence at that time, such discourse must be treated with scepticism given that news “was determined by the necessity of winning the war” and national survival.²² However, the colonial battles of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, marked a new chapter for the BBC. There was fear that nationalist movements would facilitate the spread of communism.²³ In this context, the Corporation strove to portray itself as an impartial and independent news provider, all the while playing a nationalizing function as an authoritative arbiter between competing definitions of community.

A Lingering Attachment to an Empire in Decline

The Government intend that the Corporation should remain independent in the preparation of programs for overseas audiences, although it should obtain from the government departments concerned such information about conditions in those countries and the policy of His Majesty's government towards them as will permit it to plan its programs in the national interest.²⁴

- 7 BBC claims to independence and impartiality in post-war broadcasting need to be understood in the context of mass decolonisation: From 1945 until the end of the Century, no less than ninety-six new states were founded as a consequence of the decolonisation process. British international broadcasting began with the launch of the BBC *Empire Service* in 1932, reaching the African continent, Australasia, British Guiana, Burma, Canada, the Federated Malay States, India, Trinidad and the West Indies. The service was renamed *General Forces Service* in 1944, *General Overseas Service* in 1947 and *External Services* in 1948, before being consolidated into the *World Service* in 1965.²⁵ Originally aimed at English-speakers throughout the British Empire, the Corporation broadcast in forty languages by 1959.²⁶ Overseas services grew exponentially and were funded by government revenues rather than by the domestic licence fee.²⁷
- 8 However, the BBC's transition from supportive representations of British imperialism to those of a multicultural Commonwealth cannot simply be described in the linear terms suggested by the multiple renaming of its international broadcasting service. Post-Second World War programming reflected the complexities and inconsistencies of government attitudes and policies towards colonized peoples.²⁸ In a 1945 memo, BBC Director-General William Haley stated his belief that the British were "*nowhere near finished in [their] island or world story*".²⁹ Such claims to empire and an island story as features of national identity reflected a deeply rooted imperial attitude that could still be found in British society, despite the fact that India was already on the brink of independence.
- 9 As the British Empire went into decline, deference towards those in positions of authority began to erode³⁰ and the 1956 Suez Crisis (also known as the Tripartite Aggression) became a defining test for the BBC's self-portrayal as an independent and impartial broadcaster. When the newly elected Egyptian President, Gamal Nasser, announced the nationalization of the *Suez Canal Company* on 26th July 1956, Anthony Eden's Conservative government went to great lengths in an attempt to win a propaganda war on the home front and abroad.³¹ Press Secretary William Clark stated that the Prime Minister "*had instructed the Lord Chancellor [...] to prepare an instrument which would take over the BBC all together and subject it wholly to the will of the Government*".³²
- 10 The artificial Suez waterway had been completed in 1869 and held great strategic importance for British and French trade as it connected the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Indeed, the Middle East was home to the greatest identified crude oil reserve in the 1950s and the British had a strong colonial past and military presence in the region.³³ On 24th October 1956, British, French and Israeli government representatives concluded secret talks in Paris with the signing of an agreement, which later became known as the *Protocol of Sèvres*. Together, they agreed to take military action in an attempt to reverse Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal Company. In this context of collusion, Israel invaded Egypt on 29th October, while British and French forces landed in the Canal Zone on 5th November. A ceasefire was announced the following day and the

withdrawal of forces took place on 18th November. Yet the Suez Crisis took its toll, culminating in Eden's resignation on 9th January 1957. In the immediate aftermath, Eden himself reflected that the experience had "*not so much changed our fortunes as revealed realities*" with respect to the United Kingdom's role in the world.³⁴ His Egyptian foreign policy failure showed his fundamental miscalculation regarding American President Dwight Eisenhower who favoured a peaceful settlement. It was the first time the United Nations had sent a peacekeeping force (United Nations Emergency Force) to oversee the end of hostilities and withdrawal of occupying forces.³⁵

- 11 At the beginning of the crisis over nationalization, there was a political consensus between Eden and Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell but this evaporated as the Opposition did not support military action without approval from the United Nations.³⁶ The Conservative government quickly realized that the fight against Nasser lay on an unsound foundation from a legal perspective as the Egyptian President's announcement implied buying out the *Suez Canal Company* shareholders.³⁷ This partially explains why the Government so vehemently sought to win a propaganda war presenting Nasser as the villain of the piece whilst secretly preparing for military action. Attempts to influence broadcasting took place internationally and on the home front.

Government Interference with Broadcasting during the Suez Crisis

*"[...] the BBC should do nothing to underline the existence of party division and disunity at a time of crisis."*³⁸

- 12 According to the 1946 White Paper on broadcasting policy, the treatment of a particular story must be the same in overseas and domestic news bulletins.³⁹ This was hotly debated within the BBC. Retired military officer and director of BBC Overseas services Ian Jacob quickly imposed his view that news items should be selected for Cold War purposes: "*broadcasting to one's own people is quite a different professional job from broadcasting to foreign countries, and efforts to try and escape from this difference are efforts to put one's head in the sand.*"⁴⁰ The British government for its part was acutely aware of the success of Cairo-based *Voice of the Arabs* (*Sawt al-Arab*) service, which was broadcast across the Arab world and helped Nasser in his bid to lead an Arab nationalist movement.⁴¹ According to Professor of journalism Douglas Boyd, this was the "*first international radio war among western countries over a developing region.*"⁴² The Government had already been attempting to influence radio and print in the vicinity to encourage Arabs to join British-backed military forces in the context of the Second World War. Although unknown to the general public at the time, the British Foreign Office was funding the *Near East Broadcasting Station* (*Sharq al-Adna*) and in 1955 installed what was then considered a powerful medium-wave transmitter in Cyprus.⁴³ The BBC whose *External Services* were also funded by the Foreign Office occasionally provided assistance. Indeed, British facilities in Cyprus contributed more generally to the activities of the Central Treaty Organization, a pro-West military alliance that was founded in 1955 and sought to curb Soviet influence in the Middle East.
- 13 In October 1956, the *Near East Broadcasting Station* was officially requisitioned by the British government and renamed the *Voice of Britain*: The Foreign Office took charge of programming, the service Director as well as his staff either resigned or were fired and

Arab BBC announcers were called in to keep the service running.⁴⁴ The relay station was eventually handed over to the BBC in 1957, as the British Government realized during the Suez Crisis how untrusted and ineffectual *The Voice of Britain* was as a propaganda tool. In November 1956, left-wing Labour MP Tony Benn denounced the secrecy around the station's operations and stated: "*It is morally wrong, and it is not the voice of Britain.*"⁴⁵ The following month, left-wing Labour MP Barbara Castle also criticized the service as "*a Government agency which is pouring out partial propaganda, which, I must add [...] is very dull and bad propaganda.*"⁴⁶

- 14 Despite the BBC being involved with the British government's covert international broadcasting and propaganda, tensions quickly rose at a domestic level in the period from Nasser's July announcement to the October military invasion in 1956. Prime Minister Eden applied pressure on the press and broadcasters at the highest levels: He exploited his network of personal contacts with ministers, key newspaper and BBC figures, organized nonattributable political briefings and pursued methods of censorship.⁴⁷ In particular, Eden met with several editors-in-chief and his Press Secretary, William Clark, held confidential press briefings as well as meetings with BBC Director-General Ian Jacob and ITN Editor Geoffrey Cox.⁴⁸ The Prime Minister also demanded a televised ministerial address to the nation and succeeded in securing a spot on a BBC *Home Service* radio programme (*At Home and Abroad*) for an outspoken supporter of his policies on the Suez Canal crisis.⁴⁹ Eden's ally, Australian Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies, had originally been side-lined from the broadcast due to the announcement that British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd was going to make a ministerial address at around the same time. However, Eden telephoned BBC Chairman Alexander Cadogan in order to secure Menzie's invitation. It is noteworthy that Cadogan was also a government-appointed Director of the *Suez Canal Company* and had previously been Eden's Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office.
- 15 Yet Eden's tactical success was almost immediately mitigated. This may be demonstrated by the BBC's decision to air a *Light Service* radio programme called *Special Survey on the Suez Canal Crisis*, on 15th August. In the interests of voicing alternative views to those of the Government, the programme included a pre-recorded excerpt from a pro-Nasser Egyptian military officer, Major Salah Salem. The very next day, Eden ordered Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd to conduct an investigation into the programme and the latter commented: "*I think it an outrage that a body widely believed to be in part at least associated with the British Government [the BBC] should broadcast at such a moment a speech by a notorious enemy*".⁵⁰ Eden also instructed the Colonial Secretary to write to Postmaster General⁵¹ Charles Hill, particularly with reference to the BBC Charter. However, the Postmaster General's response highlighted the limits of Government interference with the Corporation's editorial choices: "*While the powers of formal intervention remain so limited, it is only by informal contact and discussion that programme contact can be influenced.*"⁵²
- 16 Once again, Eden telephoned and wrote to BBC Chairman Cadogan and thus obtained a promise not to broadcast any similar programmes during the London Conference. This conference (the first of two) took place from 18th to 23rd August 1956 and was organized by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. Invitations were sent to all states that had signed the 1888 *Constantinople Convention* regarding Suez Canal oversight, as well as those concerned by cargo shipping in the area. The British Government clearly saw BBC airing of any divisive views regarding the Suez Crisis as likely to influence the

attitude of conference attendees. On 17th August, Eden also summoned BBC Director-General Ian Jacob from his holidays in Suffolk in order to discuss the Suez Canal controversy.⁵³ Although what transpired between the two is not exactly known, the Prime Minister subsequently expressed his feeling that the BBC General-Director was more aware of the Government's position on the national interest and his belief that informal prior consultation with the Corporation should be further developed. Eden and his government saw the BBC as an influential national institution, which ought to be utilized and watched over closely. It was no coincidence that they sought to install permanent broadcasting facilities at N° 10 Downing Street in August that year.⁵⁴

- 17 The Prime Minister's direct and informal interventions at the highest levels of the BBC were also accompanied by extra-legal and legal measures, which favoured self-censorship. In particular, the Services, Press and Broadcasting Committee Secretary, Admiral George Thomson, issued two Defence Notices (D-Notices) to the print and broadcast media in August and a further one on 1st November 1956.⁵⁵ The media were thus advised not to reveal any details of troop movements in the Middle East prior to the invasion and of course the very existence of the D-Notices was to remain secret. Subsequently little was published or broadcast on the issue of troop movements.
- 18 The D-Notice system had been set up in 1912 as an alternative to "overt censorship"⁵⁶ and was the result of long-running debate between Parliament and the press dating back to 1880.⁵⁷ Yet for the first fifty years, even Parliament did not know about the D-Notice system's activities⁵⁸ and in the 1950s there were few breaches. In 1956, the committee was composed of Services officials, press and broadcasting representatives for the BBC and ITV. Although the D-Notice was a non-legally binding arrangement between the British media and the government, news providers were under pressure to carry out self-censorship. Indeed, editors had to carefully consider the post-publication and post-broadcasting legal implications should they go ahead despite the warning. In particular, there was always the risk of prosecution under the 1911 *Official Secrets Act*, which provided no public interest defence for the media.
- 19 Censorship also stemmed from the BBC and ITV's adherence to the Fourteen Day Rule, which restricted public knowledge of political debate by forbidding radio and television services from broadcasting news of any issues (beyond parliamentary proceedings) that were being discussed in Parliament for a period of fourteen days. Referred to pejoratively as the Fortnight Gag, this principle had been introduced voluntarily by the BBC in 1944 and formalized as an *aide-mémoire* in 1947.⁵⁹ In 1955, the BBC sought to have the principle abandoned but Eden's government insisted on making it an official rule. Such a restriction on free speech reflected politicians' perceptions of broadcasting as a threat to the primacy of Parliament in the form of immediate scrutiny and commentary by an unelected body. However, the experience of the Suez Crisis and ITV developments in news coverage proved to be too much for Eden's government to withstand. The Fourteen Day Rule was suspended as of 18th December 1956.⁶⁰

Conclusion

- 20 Tensions over independence and impartiality at the BBC during the 1956 Suez Crisis were marked by the United Kingdom's lingering attachment to an empire that was already in decline. The crisis was manifold in the context of British post-war politics, decolonisation and the Cold War. Anthony Eden's Conservative government fought a

ferocious propaganda war overseas and at home, and which severely limited the BBC's ability to provide impartial news. The BBC's independence was at best ambiguous as demonstrated by its implication in British government covert overseas broadcasting and propaganda. There was a heavy reliance on an old boy network as reflected by informal exchanges at the highest levels. This was facilitated by the Government's authority to appoint the Corporation's Board of Governors and control the annual television licence fee. Like the press, broadcasting was subject to censorship and self-censorship in the build-up to the invasion. There was always the implicit threat of legal action should the BBC not heed government advice. The golden age of British wireless was giving way to the expansion of television but the radio propaganda war remained essential to the British government during the Suez Crisis. The immediacy of broadcasting was still perceived as a threat to the primacy of Parliament and the Government clearly believed in the BBC's power to influence public opinion, given that it was already a well-established social institution with a nationalizing function. Both the press and broadcasting were severely restricted in their ability to report on events regarding the crisis.

- 21 Egyptian President Gamal Nasser's nationalization of the *Suez Canal Company* and the ensuing crisis show the structural weaknesses of the BBC in the face of British government pressure, yet such direct and informal exchanges regarding editorial choices were largely unknown to the general public. This perhaps helps to explain how the Corporation survived with its reputation for independence and impartiality intact. As events developed in the build-up to the invasion, cross-party political consensus was lost. Eden and his government were unable to sustain an image of unity in the national interest despite their best efforts. Yet the Labour Party as a whole did not benefit from this political disarray. Harold MacMillan replaced Eden as Prime Minister and led the Conservatives to victory in the 1959 general election whilst vaunting the relative prosperity of the country's mixed economy and evidence of his strong stance against Soviet influence. In any case, the BBC's subsequent policy of giving as much domestic and overseas airtime to Labour Party dissent as to Government views appears to have been its saving grace.
- 22 In the following years, the broadcaster itself proudly reimagined the Suez Crisis as a time when government pressure had been successfully resisted against all odds. For the purposes of the BBC's review of its first fifty years, the organization published *BBC Handbook 1973*, which included remarks on the Suez Crisis by then Director-General Charles Curran: "*Against formidable arguments about the national interest, the duty to provide an impartial service was held by the BBC to be paramount, and the pressures were successfully resisted*"⁶¹. The reality is rather more nuanced as the Corporation's interpretation of impartiality was so limited at that time. More generally, the case of the Suez Crisis is situated in a long-running series of tensions between the BBC's public interest tenets and pressure from governments seeking favourable coverage in times of conflict. From reporting of the decolonisation process and the Troubles to the Kosovo War, such tensions in the latter half of the twentieth Century are indicative of the broadcaster's resistance against undue interference, albeit with varying degrees of success.

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ABSTRACTS

As the world's oldest national broadcaster, The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is unique in its contribution to British life and its level of international influence. The BBC is well known for its historic core mission (to inform, educate and entertain) and commitment to the principles of independence and impartiality. Yet the definition and practical application of these tenets are far from clear-cut. Considered by some to be a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization, the BBC has been subjected to much criticism throughout its long history regarding its ability to resist State and corporate pressures. This article seeks to explore State pressures in the context of calls for national unity in times of crisis when tensions with the BBC are at their greatest. To this end, a qualitative analysis of the 1956 Suez Crisis is conducted and is linked to the decline of the British Empire. This study shows the limited interpretation of impartiality by the BBC at that time. Anthony Eden's Conservative government fought a propaganda war at home and abroad in the build-up to military intervention. The BBC's independence was ambiguous at best, although it emerged from the crisis with its reputation intact due to its insistence on the notion of impartiality.

Plus ancien diffuseur national du monde, la *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) est singulière au vu de sa contribution à la vie des Britanniques et le degré d'influence qu'elle exerce à l'international. La BBC est bien connue pour sa mission fondamentale (informer, éduquer et divertir) et son attachement aux principes d'indépendance et d'impartialité. Pourtant, la définition et l'application de ces fondements ne sont guère évidentes. Considérée par certains comme une organisation non-gouvernementale quasi-autonome, la BBC a été sujette à de nombreuses critiques au fil de son histoire concernant sa capacité à résister à des pressions étatiques et corporatistes. Cet article vise à explorer les pressions étatiques dans le contexte d'appels à l'unité nationale durant des moments de crise, lorsque les tensions avec la BBC sont les plus marquées. À cette fin, il convient de mener une analyse qualitative de la crise du canal de Suez de 1956, qui est associée au déclin de l'empire britannique. Cette étude fait ressortir l'interprétation limitée du principe d'impartialité par la BBC à cette époque-là. Le gouvernement conservateur d'Anthony Eden mena une guerre de propagande au niveau national et international durant la période précédant l'intervention militaire. L'indépendance de la BBC fut au mieux ambiguë, mais l'organisation sortit de la crise sans que sa réputation soit ternie grâce à son insistance sur la notion d'impartialité.

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Mots-clés: BBC, censure, Crise du canal de Suez, impartialité, indépendance, autocensure

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