

Chapter 11 - It's All Academic

How do you prove an organisation like the BBC is biased? Indeed how do you even define bias? Does the refusal to cover a story prove bias, or the headlining of another? Does inviting more pro-Union guests to take part in a programme than pro-independence guests indicate bias? The honest truth is that bias is almost impossible to prove.

But to deny that there were significant concerns over the BBC's handling of the independence referendum is to deny reality. Thousands of people took part in peaceful demonstrations against the BBC during the referendum campaign. Many respected commentators, including at least one high profile Radio Scotland presenter, criticised the corporation's referendum output. The corporation had issues before the referendum. The referendum merely served to expose and magnify them.

When the SNP won a historic victory in the 2011 Scottish election, BBC Scotland should have anticipated that political tensions would heighten and its output would be scrutinised. In February 2014, former BBC Scotland presenter Derek Bateman wrote of BBC Scotland management:

“If they had the talent, they would have foreseen what was coming down the track nearly three years ago and immediately instituted a balance checking system to monitor their output and, without viewers even knowing, would have been providing carefully unbiased news reports. It didn't need to be precise and balanced on a weekly basis but it would have provided an at-a-glance service to producers.”

Bateman had been responding to an academic study published in January 2014 by Newsnet Scotland. The study had looked at referendum output on evening TV news for a full year. The results showed that an overwhelming number of news items were styled in a manner the research team concluded was favourable to the anti-independence campaign.



The research team was led by Dr John Robertson of the University of the West of Scotland. The study covered the period from September 2012 to September 2013 and took in hundreds of hours of early evening TV news broadcast by the BBC's Reporting Scotland and STV's Scotland Tonight. The results indicated the No campaign had benefited by a ratio of 3:2.

The study revealed:

- Reporting Scotland broadcast 272 news items deemed favourable to the No campaign against only 171 favourable to Yes. STV was only marginally less biased with the 255 for No and 172 for Yes.
- Statements which made use of academic, scientific or 'independent' evidence favoured the No campaign by 22 to 4 on BBC Scotland and by 20 to 7 on STV.
- Personalising independence arguments as being the wishes of Alex Salmond appeared 35 times on BBC and 34 times on ITV with no such personalisation of any of the No campaign's arguments.
- Broadcasts containing language that was considered insulting to independence campaigners occurred on 18 times on both BBC Scotland and STV but language interpreted as insulting to pro-Union campaigners appeared only 3 times on each broadcaster's news reports.
- Finishing a broadcast item with anti-independence claims which were unchallenged happened 28 times on BBC Scotland and 34 times on STV whilst ending items with unchallenged pro-independence claims occurred only 8 times and 17 times respectively.

According to the research, many broadcasts focussed heavily on economic concerns with Trident, energy and financial institutions cited as examples. This, argued Dr Robertson, had the effect of reducing the independence debate purely to economics and ignoring all other arguments.

Dr Robertson said:

"I see signs elsewhere of a wider discourse, around democracy, compassion and rights, absent in the news broadcasts researched here. The narrowing of debate to shallow materialist concerns can be seen as ideologically driven efforts to strip the Yes campaign of opportunities to debate."

Health-related issues were the other dominant theme according to the report which highlighted a lack of balance in news items.

The report said:

“For example, on 27/9/12 the case of a Scottish patient seeking free cancer drug treatment only available in England was highlighted and linked to the relative lack of GP control in Scotland. This began a mini-series of reports on alleged failings in the Scottish NHS by Reporting Scotland reporters and by Labour spokespersons. No balancing cases were reported of a flow in the other direction although such did appear in the popular press.”

The report’s findings on broadcast news coverage of the NHS were in line with observations made by online site Newsnet Scotland. The site had been closely following BBC Scotland’s handling of NHS stories and had uncovered evidence of exaggerated and over-dramatic news reports. Newsnet Scotland had also published articles highlighting a tendency on the part of the BBC in Scotland to compare the Scottish health service unfavourably with its counterpart in England.

Dr Robertson’s report also noted a tendency amongst STV and the BBC to omit mention of links to the UK Government of some organisations. The counter was the case where groups had links to the Scottish government. These tended to be made clear to the viewer.

The report said:

“The use of evidence from sources other than the parties themselves and which might be presented as ‘independent’, ‘academic’ or ‘scientific’ is a measure of quality in political debate.

Notably, there was very little use of such evidence in the reporting overall and, where there was, there was clear tendency to use anti-independence over pro-independence evidence.

Though a rare phenomenon overall, reporting tended to link pro-independence evidence from Scottish government sponsored committees to their sponsorship while UK advisory groups such as the Office for Budget Responsibility, The Institute for Fiscal Studies and several Parliamentary, Treasury, or House of Lords committees were typically treated as independent despite linkages to UK government and other government departments or units with a vested interest in the Union.

Indeed the IFS was referred to as a ‘well-respected think tank’ (Reporting Scotland, 19/11/12) whereas a Glasgow University academic was ‘outed’ as having been ‘bought’ by the SNP to support the independence case (Reporting Scotland, 21/8/13).”

Another issue highlighted by the study involved a tendency on the part of both broadcasters to personalise the case for independence using Alex Salmond. The report said:

“Personalisation of political issues is long-established strategy to weaken arguments, shifting focus from collective reasoning or shared values to supposed personal desires and personality traits. Historically, this tendency or strategy has been used to demonise and to undermine numerous political figures in the UK including Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock.”

The report concluded:

“So, on the objective evidence presented here, the mainstream TV coverage of the first year of the independence referendum campaigns has not been fair or balanced. Taken together, we have evidence of coverage which seems likely to have damaged the Yes campaign.”

In a separate statement, Dr Robertson said:

“Perfect balance or perfect impartiality is not attainable. Fairness requires only the continuing application of reflective and consistent methods to maximise the levels, within single broadcasts and over longer periods. The crude numerical balance of quantities of statements identifiable as supportive of different sides in a debate is reasonably important but less so than other factors.

When broadcasts begin too often with bad news for one side this is unfair. Where one side commonly leads off while the other has to react, this is unfair. Where bad news is repeated with high frequency in one broadcast, this is unfair. Where interviewers are not consistent in their approaches regarding tone, difficulty or tendency to interrupt, this is unfair. Where witnesses of clear bias or incompetence or where evidence of dubious validity are used to support one side consistently against the other, this is unfair, unprofessional and perhaps corrupt.

Where there is no procedure at editorial level to monitor fairness within single broadcasts and over longer periods, this is, similarly, unfair, unprofessional and perhaps corrupt.”

Dr Robertson’s research was sensational. An academic had quantified, in great detail, much of what many in the independence movement had been saying for some time. Broadcast news, especially BBC news, was not covering the independence referendum in an impartial manner. The study was seen as vindication by many supporters of independence. The Newsnet Scotland article took social media by storm and was re-tweeted thousands of times. It became one of the best read stories the site ever published and was read by tens

of thousands of people. Some members of the public complained to both STV and BBC Scotland. Scottish Television challenged the findings and insisted it was not favouring any side in the referendum. The commercial broadcaster left it at that. BBC Scotland's reaction was altogether different. It went on the offensive.

Bosses at BBC Scotland sent a stern email to the academic, copying it to his superior at the University of the West of Scotland. The email was sent by BBC Scotland Head of Public Policy & Corporate Affairs, Ian Small. In the communication, reproduced below, the BBC official called into question the credibility of the study, saying the BBC had "serious concerns with the methodology applied" as well as the "factual accuracy" of the report's conclusions.

Mr Small wrote:

"Dear Dr Robertson

I read with interest your report on BBC and STV news output, relative to the reporting of the Scottish referendum campaign. On the basis of the document, as published by the University of the West of Scotland we have a number of serious concerns with the methodology applied, with the factual accuracy of a significant number of the contentions contained within the report and with the language used in the report itself.

As it stands, many of the conclusions you draw are, on the evidence you provide, unsubstantiated and/or of questionable legitimacy. The BBC, as outlined within its Editorial Guidelines, is committed to accurate and impartial reporting, a commitment that lies at the heart of the public service we offer to audiences.

The independence referendum is the most important constitutional issue of recent times and our duty to provide fair and balanced reporting of that referendum is paramount. Based on what you have published, your report offers a highly subjective and questionable analysis of our news output.

Can I ask if you intend to publish the data to which you refer in the report, given that the report itself contains no footnotes or appendices to allow further analysis or consideration? Or, failing that, would you supply the data to us to allow assessment of the information which has underpinned your findings? I await your response."

It was unprecedented for BBC Scotland to question the competence of an academic in this manner. The broadcaster had headlined scores of academic studies without ever subjecting them to anything like this kind of aggressive rigour.

Moreover, BBC Scotland was questioning the professional integrity of an academic - unheard of.

Within days of the email, the BBC mounted what can only be described as a campaign aimed at discrediting the academic study. Official emails were sent to people who had contacted the broadcaster to complain about its referendum coverage, citing the research.

The responses, sent out by the BBC's complaints department said the BBC had spent "several days" reviewing the research and concluded that the Dr Robertson had used questionable methodology that had resulted in a study of equally questionable validity.

The replies, which were sent out en masse regardless of the specifics of the complaint, said:

"It is our view that the report consistently fails to support its contentions with factually accurate evidence; for example there are several substantive factual inaccuracies within the references it makes to Reporting Scotland news output.

We are also concerned, for example, with the inclusion of a number of non-referendum stories within the data outlined in the report.

We also believe that the report failed to define terminology used within it; for example 'fairness', 'insulting language' etc. or whether any account was taken of what the BBC's own Editorial Guidelines or the Ofcom Broadcasting Code have to say in this respect."

On the claim contained in the report by Dr Robertson that BBC news coverage had caused damage to the Yes campaign, the BBC complaints department hit back, saying:

"The report concludes the authors have 'evidence of coverage which seems likely to have damaged the Yes campaign.' Our strongly held view is that there is no evidence whatsoever, as contained within the report, that supports this contention. It is no more than an assumption, based on the report's findings which, themselves, we contest."

The discomfort the BBC felt over the study was clear. To challenge the research findings was one thing, but to publicly call into question the professionalism of the academic who led the research was quite another. But the episode was not being played out under any media spotlight. Despite the sensational conclusions of the academic study and the unorthodox response from BBC Scotland, there were no dramatic headlines. Newspapers had employed a news blackout of the research. Scotland's traditional media circled the wagons.

Former BBC presenter Derek Bateman highlighted what appeared to be a conspiracy of silence after the damning University report was published.

“Has anyone come across coverage of the West of Scotland University media bias report in the mainstream media? I can't see it anywhere and don't suppose BBC Scotland discussed it either. Isn't that in itself remarkable...a Scottish university produces a report on a year-long study of news and finds a disturbing trend showing bias in what is a regulated industry - broadcasting - including the taxpayer funded BBC, and no one in the world of journalism in our country thinks it's worth telling the public. That's a subject worth academic scrutiny all by itself...what principles do the media adhere to in judging items, who decides and what criteria are applied.”

Despite the anti-independence stance adopted by many newspapers, the lack of coverage afforded the story was still somewhat surprising, given that in the space of 12 months:

- A former BBC Scotland presenter had accused the head of news of trying to influence the content of political programmes.[Covered in Ch.12]
- BBC Scotland had been found guilty by its own watchdog of misleading viewers over a key independence issue.
- One of BBC Scotland's top political reporters had resigned pending an investigation into a news broadcast.
- Thousands had protested outside BBC Scotland's HQ against what they perceived was its pro-Union bias

There were no screaming headlines condemning the BBC, not even when the corporation went beyond rejecting the study by sending emails to the University Principal. No newspaper editorials condemned the broadcasters' clear attempt at intimidation. One newspaper had the opportunity to run the University of the West of Scotland report as a scoop, which would have been massive, but the Herald ignored the study despite being in possession of it days before it was sent to Newsnet Scotland.

The Daily Record *did* publish a column written by SNP MSP Joan McAlpine which highlighted Dr Robertson's study and called for TV bosses to act. But apart from that, there was nothing from the traditional Scottish media. If it hadn't been for sites like Newsnet Scotland, the research would never have seen the light of day.

Meanwhile BBC Scotland bosses upped the ante. The corporation had compiled an extraordinary list of questions and challenges for the academic. The list was sent to Dr Robertson and again copied to the Principal of the University, Professor Craig Mahoney. Accompanying the list of questions was an equally extraordinary covering email, again from Mr Ian Small.

Small wrote:

As noted in our earlier correspondence, we would be very interested in seeing the raw data which underpinned your report and we wonder if you might be willing to share that with us.

We would, of course, be very happy to talk to you about your report and our interpretation of it.

The reason we have copied this email to the Principal, Professor Craig Mahoney (as we have all of the correspondence we have sent to you), is because we believe the report, with which we have serious concerns, has the potential to impact on the corporate reputation of both institutions.

BBC Scotland bosses wanted to see the academic's raw data. They wanted to 'talk to' Dr Robertson about their interpretation of his report. They had copied the University Principal into the communication and implied the episode had potential to impact on the corporate reputation of both institutions. Just why an academic study using recognised methodology should impact on the corporate reputation of the University of the West of Scotland wasn't fully explained. The email had a tone of intimidation about it.

Dr Robertson was unfazed by the BBC's bullying approach. Below is his response to Ian Small's covering email, with the BBC official's comments reproduced, this time in bold.

As noted in our earlier correspondence, we would be very interested in seeing the raw data which underpinned your report and we wonder if you might be willing to share that with us.

No. Would you have asked to see the raw data if the report had been favourable to the BBC? Have you ever asked another researcher for such? Indeed, aren't the broadcasts you own, the raw data?

Further, given the responsibilities you remind us of in [the reference to BBC Editorial Guidelines], what have you actually done to monitor the coverage. Do you have an internal report along lines similar to my research? How do your findings compare? Can I see the raw data?

We would, of course, be very happy to talk to you about your report and our interpretation of it.

Report on it (Reporting Scotland). Let your experts comment then let me reply to them. Post all the documents on your website so that licence payers may read them carefully.

Continued:

It is not appropriate for media managers to suppress research they disagree with and then mount a campaign to discredit it while at the same time ignoring its presence online.

The reason we have copied this email to the Principal, Professor Craig Mahoney (as we have all of the correspondence we have sent to you), is because we believe the report, with which we have serious concerns, has the potential to impact on the corporate reputation of both institutions.

This sails very close to bullying of the kind we might expect in a less democratic country. I'm unsure about your limiting of reputation to the corporate. Universities are so much more than that. I'd be more worried if I thought it might damage our wider reputation in the public sphere or with potential applicants to study with us. I suspect, based on the massive online debate which you ignore, it will have the opposite effect. I have not copied this to your head of institution.

The usual approach by the BBC to a controversial study that suggested a less than satisfactory performance from a public service institution, would have been to report it. BBC Scotland had created a veritable cottage industry headlining studies that were critical of the Scottish NHS and other public sector bodies. It headlined these studies without feeling the need to demand answers down to the micro-level from the academics responsible. Yet here was a study the broadcaster wanted not just to bury, but to discredit.

The list of challenges and questions posed by BBC Scotland chiefs would have required weeks if not months of resource to address comprehensively. It appeared to have been designed to undermine and overwhelm rather than facilitate dialogue and increase understanding.

There were several inaccuracies listed, one of which related to the number of hours the study was said to have covered. Dr Robertson had given a figure of 730 hours in his report when the actual figure should have been 620 hours. The BBC also highlighted cases where the academic report had misidentified Unionist politicians and in one case the date of broadcast of an episode of Reporting Scotland. A few of the challenges had merit, but most were insignificant and were irrelevant to the report conclusions.

It's worth having a look at some of the challenges listed by the BBC together with Dr Robertson's response. These exchanges are reproduced in the following pages. They are indented and italicised with BBC comments first and Dr Robertson's reply directly beneath. Where the BBC references Dr Robertson's report, I have emboldened the reference.

[BBC]

*The report then outlines a number of ‘coding categories’ used to analyse the data (though the report offers no appendices, footnotes, bibliography or references to allow further interrogation of whatever data was analysed or of the criteria applied in the process of that analysis). No indication is given here of who has ‘made use of’ any such statements. Is the suggestion that BBC Scotland has ‘made use of’ such statements in its reporting? If so, is the suggestion then, as it would seem to be, that such use was made by BBC “**in support**” of either campaign?*

[Dr Robertson]

If this is the case, this reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how News, and in particular BBC News, operates. As an impartial news broadcaster, it is not the role or function of BBC news to ‘support’ any argument but rather to provide a platform for a range of views to be heard.

This is a hugely important point, much researched in academia across Europe and the US and central to any explanation which goes beyond my account to identify causes. Journalists are known to be subject to peer pressure. Junior reporters work toward, perhaps sub-consciously, the approval of their seniors.

Members of media elites (owners, editors, heads and directors) interlock socially with other elite members (politicians, officers, judges, directors, CEs) via selective education, early careers and social/cultural membership. No conspiracy is required. Elite members act in their own interests and those interests are the same as the interests of their groups. Thus thought control in liberal democracies is made possible and far more subtle than in totalitarian states where the people know, always, not to trust their media.

You misunderstand yourself and the BBC. Impartiality is not attainable. Like many academics, I practice self-awareness but even then I make no claims.

This was indeed a key point. Dr Robertson was arguing that some reporters may have simply been conforming to historic practices. All large organisations have institutionalised sub-cultures where ‘norms’ prevail. It was entirely possible that reporters were not pursuing any agenda but were simply presenting news in a way they had been conditioned to.

The backgrounds of those who control the UK media were also highly relevant. In 2006, the Sutton Trust which operates on behalf of the BBC, reported on the educational backgrounds of leading UK journalists. The report found that although only 7% of the population went to fee-paying schools, these same

schools produce 54% of the top (best paid) journalists in the UK. Only 12% of top journalists went to state schools. A whopping 56% of them went to only Oxford or Cambridge, as did David Cameron, George Osborne, Ed Miliband and Ed Balls. 72% of them went to the 13 top (Russell Group) UK universities.

The Sutton Trust report had concluded:

“Is news coverage preoccupied with the issues and interests of the social elite that journalists represent? Should the profession not better reflect the broader social make-up of the audiences it serves?”

His point about totalitarian regimes was interesting. People living in dictatorships know fine well their state broadcaster is manipulating news in order to portray the regime in as good a light as possible. North Koreans know dissent is not allowed. A similar situation exists in China. The peoples of these two countries have a private mistrust of their state run media. National media in such societies can inform the citizen, but its ability to influence is severely restricted.

In the former Soviet Union the state broadcaster *Tass* was held in contempt by huge swathes of the USSR, especially citizens of the satellite states. Foreign media, like the BBC, regularly ridiculed the Soviet news organisation for its manipulation of news and its refusal to countenance dissent. The BBC’s power lay in its ability to instil trust. The Scottish public overwhelmingly trusted the BBC. If Reporting Scotland told them a newly independent Scotland would be thrown out of the EU, then they believed it. If Good Morning Scotland told them anti-English sentiment was on the increase, then they believed it.

The BBC also challenged Dr Robertson’s claim that his research had uncovered a 3:2 ratio in favour of anti-independence statements, in news reports.

[BBC]

*The focus on numerical interpretation is restated in the report’s next contention, that “**The simple numerical preponderance of anti-independence statements over pro-independence statements by a ratio of c3:2 on Reporting Scotland and on STV, is also clear.**”*

*In this instance, the report offers a possible explanation of this, as “**the editorial decision to allow all three anti-independence parties to respond to each SNP statement creating an unavoidable predominance of statements from the former..**”*

We would make two related observations. First, we would not accept that, by allowing the other parties to comment on referendum issues, this, in any way, is evidence of bias or lack of ‘fairness’.

Continued:

Most would regard such an inclusive approach as evidence of steps taken to allow the range of voices to be heard.

[Dr Robertson]

Agreed; I offered the explanation in the same spirit and do not tie this behaviour to any suggestion of bias or lack of fairness.

[BBC]

*Secondly, it is simply not correct to suggest that “**all three anti-independence parties (are allowed) to respond to each SNP statement (our emphasis)**”.*

If that contention were correct, taking the report’s own ‘evidence’, the table noted above would show that, for the 171 pro-independence /SNP statements the report claims appeared on Reporting Scotland, the number of anti-independence/SNP statements would be 513 (171 x 3), not 262.

[Dr Robertson]

By ‘each’ I do not mean ‘every’. This is getting desperate!

[BBC]

Political comment on such issues is sought according to the requirements of the story, with balance achieved over a period of time rather than necessarily within any one programme or news item. Given the constraints of time and other factors which impact on the construction of every broadcaster’s news bulletins, this is normal practice across the industry.

[Dr Robertson]

What steps do you take to ensure balance over time? Why is there, then, not balance over the 12 months reported?

Again the BBC had missed the point. There needn’t have been any deliberate attempt to favour pro-Union parties, but the fact remained that they had been. Dr Robertson agreed his team’s findings did not prove bias or a lack of fairness. He did though question why, if balance was supposed to have been achieved over a period of time, it hadn’t in twelve months.

BBC Scotland hadn’t seemed to realise that by allowing pro-Union politicians to outnumber pro-independence politicians was not just offering a range of views, it was offering a range of pro-Union views. It wasn’t necessarily deliberate bias, it was poor management. BBC Scotland chiefs had shoehorned a template designed for a traditional election onto the independence referendum.

It resulted in broadcast space for the SNP, Labour, Conservatives and Lib Dems ... but little for the Scottish Greens or the SSP. It resulted in a lack of balance a village idiot could have foreseen. The corporation also defended a broadcast which had included a claim that the removal of the Trident nuclear weapons system could lead to the loss of 6,500 jobs.

[BBC]

*The report refers to a Reporting Scotland item on Trident on 29/10/2012 which it claims “**is driven by a weight of one-sided and unchallenged evidence and commentary**”, cites “**unnamed economic advisers**” who are “**allowed to suggest 6500 jobs (could be) lost if Trident goes and an overall cost of £20bn while the report finishes ominously with ‘Whitehall could play hardball’.**”*

The Trident item consists of a report by BBC Scotland political correspondent Niall O’Gallagher, related to the visit of Secretary of State for Defence Philip Hammond MP to the Clyde base, followed by a studio interview with BBC Scotland Business and Economics Editor, Douglas Fraser. Both reports accord fully with the requirements of our Editorial Guidelines.

*The jobs figure is cited, in person, by Douglas Fraser, not by some “**unnamed economic advisers**”. In the broadcast report, he explains, using graphics, that, under current plans, that figure could go up to 8000, then says: “...but, you could look at it another way, as Nicola Sturgeon was doing; if you take the same money and spend it on other priorities, whether it’s military or civilian, you could create at least as many jobs.”*

The £20bn quoted is not the cost to the economy if Trident goes, but rather the cost of replacing Trident (which Douglas Fraser attributes to the MoD, pointing out that it’s a six-year-old figure and the MoD’s record on remaining within budget is not good. He also mentions the operating costs of £1.5bn pa).

*The report author then notes that the item “**...finishes ominously with ‘Whitehall could play hardball’**”. Aside from the questionable use of such value-laden terminology as ‘ominously’, this is simply incorrect. It doesn’t. It finishes with Douglas Fraser quoting Alex Salmond’s suggestion that a new home could be found for Trident in the USA or France.*

[Dr Robertson]

I do not question the presence of opposing views here but the weight in this piece was tilted toward uncritical presentation of the MoD arguments.

Continued:

What then is the source of the figures reported by Douglas Fraser if not 'unnamed economic advisers'?

I find the notion that Whitehall might play hardball, quite ominous and I think it was meant to sound that way too. The Alex Salmond comment does not represent the finishing statement in a sequence of ideas but rather is a throwaway piece with humorous intent. I laughed.

The BBC appeared to miss the point completely. The thrust of what Dr Robertson had said was that the views of the MoD were not challenged in any serious fashion. It was simply presented as credible and slotted into BBC Scotland news headlines with challenges left to Nicola Sturgeon. The notion that 6500 jobs could be lost was risible.

The BBC also appeared to be suggesting that the jobs figure of 6500 was a calculation made by its own reporter, Douglas Fraser. If that was indeed the case then the news report was even more questionable than the academic report had suggested. The 6500 figure was the *entire* workforce at the base. Faslane would have to close if the MoD scare was to be realised. But the Scottish government had already confirmed Faslane would remain open even *after* independence. This was a story that any competent editor should have binned, or at least presented in a manner that treated the scare with the contempt it deserved.

If BBC Scotland had really wanted to cover the issue in a balanced and informative way, it would have given equal airtime to an official answer given by the MoD to Scottish CND after the latter submitted a Freedom of Information request asking how many jobs relied on Trident. The response from the MoD confirmed that the actual number of jobs directly related to the Trident nuclear weapons system was just 520. According to official figures, of the 520, 159 were employed by the Ministry of Defence and 361 were employed by contractors. According to Scottish CND, the total when adding on indirect employment was just 1800.

To imply 6500 jobs would go in the event of independence was grossly misleading. Scottish CND also argued that the cost savings resulting from the removal of Trident would in fact lead to the creation of 3000 jobs - a net positive jobs balance of 1200. Moreover, Unionist politicians were on record giving wildly varying figures on Trident job losses. Labour MSP Jackie Baillie had claimed 11,000 jobs would be lost with a Yes vote, whilst her Westminster colleague Ian Davidson had claimed an even higher figure of 19,000 jobs.

The news report from BBC Scotland was a one dimensional regurgitation of a claim from a department of the UK Government. It was packaged up by the broadcaster and presented to the Scottish public as a serious and significant

intervention in the Scottish independence debate. As with many BBC Scotland news reports, the Yes campaign was shown on the defensive.

The list of challenges to Dr Robertson continued. My interest heightened when the list turned to the academic's critique of a BBC Scotland news report on the Scottish NHS. BBC Scotland's reporting of the Scottish Health Service was already giving cause for concern. The NHS had been targeted by the SNP's political opponents in an attempt at undermining the credibility of the Scottish government. The eagerness to damage the Scottish government had already led to false claims on hospital infections by a Labour MSP being reported by the BBC. The corporation appeared over-eager to portray the NHS in Scotland as one in crisis. There was hardly an area of the health system north of the border that hadn't spawned a melodramatic headline.

Here's the exchange between the BBC and Dr Robertson.

[BBC]

*The report then turns to broadcast reports on health issues. It says: **"For example, on 27/9/12 the case of a Scottish patient seeking free cancer drug treatment only available in England was highlighted and linked to the relative lack of GP control in Scotland."***

First, this story was not related to the referendum, nor at any point in the broadcast piece was this suggested. It was about the respective changes in the NHS in England and Scotland and the effect on patients.

[Dr Robertson]

Of course it was not explicitly related to the referendum by the reporter but, by making unfavourable comparisons between the Scottish and English NHS, it unavoidably contributes to the debate. The decision to choose a one-off case and not to balance with stories of English patients feeling pressure to move to Scotland for treatment, or other balancing ideas, leads to bias.

[BBC]

Secondly, the report is categorically not about free cancer drug treatment. Cancer is not mentioned once – the patient case study, Beth Butterfield, has lost confidence in her local doctors and wishes to be sent elsewhere. The problem she has is with the difficulty of transferring hospitals, which in theory would be easier in England due to the new reforms. What Ms Butterfield is suffering from is never explained.

"This began a mini-series of reports on alleged failings in the Scottish NHS by Reporting Scotland reporters and by Labour spokespersons."

Continued:

*This refers to a one day series of reports ('NHS Day' – 27/9/12) on BBC News, broadcast across the UK over 24 hours. It was not about “**alleged failings in the Scottish NHS**”.*

[Dr Robertson]

This story read to me as a quite unbalanced take on the relative developments in the Scottish and English NHS. It was as you note not specifically about cancer care but care generally. You write ‘categorically not about free cancer drug treatment. Cancer is not mentioned once’. Another of your substantive errors, I take it?

I read it as drawing attention to failings in the Scottish NHS. As I reply, a third-party has drawn my attention to another independent study highlighting ‘censorship and distortion’ in BBC coverage of NHS reforms in England (Huitson, O. (2012) ‘How the BBC betrayed the NHS: an exclusive report on two years of censorship and distortion’

The above research concludes:

“The BBC routinely described the Bill as a reform to empower GPs – the government’s description – rather than as turning the NHS into a market driven by shareholder interests, which was what the critics maintained – accurately, as is now becoming clear. The BBC’s public service remit should surely have required it at least to present the Bill’s purpose as contested.”

The same criticism can be reasonably applied to the Reporting Scotland story. Why was this story developed so soon after the publication of the Huitson paper?

The exchange was fascinating. The BBC claim that the story wasn’t related to the referendum was an insult to the intelligence of anyone who was following Scottish politics. Everything was seen through the prism of the referendum. If the public could be persuaded that the SNP was incapable of running the NHS then that could only help the No campaign. I was more interested though in the series of NHS reports referred to in the exchange. Newsnet Scotland had covered the reports at the time they were broadcast. The site had carried an article which had specifically highlighted the news item which had included Beth Butterfield.



The BBC was correct to say that the item in question had not focused on cancer treatment. However it wasn't correct to say the item was ostensibly about care. The thrust of the news report had been about the introduction of privatisation to the English NHS and the 'improvements' it had brought about in relation to care and treatment. The tone of the item was that by opposing any sort of private provision, the Scottish government was blocking improvement.

In a rather bizarre series of broadcasts, both on radio and TV, the corporation had spent the day informing Scottish listeners and viewers of the benefits of the English NHS. According to BBC Radio Scotland, their health correspondent Eleanor Bradford had conducted an investigation in order to determine "whether Scotland has the better system or whether it is being left behind." Interviews with two doctors, one from England and one from Scotland, gave a clear message; that Scotland was indeed being "left behind" and England's embracing of GP empowerment was the way forward. The item re-appeared on that evening's Reporting Scotland. This was the programme Dr Robertson's team had studied.

That evening's Newsnight Scotland had virtually the same piece, this time supplemented by the fruits of Ms Bradford's investigation, which turned out to be an unexplained and unexamined claim that 'costs' of patient care in the English region of Trafford were cheaper than in Scotland.

Here is what BBC Scotland Eleanor Bradford said when speaking on Newsnight Scotland:

"There are some in Scotland who think that what we shouldn't be doing is standing still. Now we like to pat ourselves on the back sometimes and say 'Oh we've got a better education system, we've got a better health system'. But is our health system really prepared for the train that is coming down the tracks, the challenge of ageing population and financial constraints?"

It's generally accepted that in Scotland we do spend more on health care, now that's often explained away by a more difficult geography where it's more expensive to provide care over a larger rural area, also greater levels of deprivation, levels of poor health.

But I've been doing some sums, and if you look at Trafford for example, part of Greater Manchester ... that is very different now to parts of the NHS in Scotland. It costs, per person, £1450 to treat someone, give them healthcare for a year in Trafford. In Glasgow the sum is very different, in Glasgow it's £2166 per person.

Now is there really such a difference between Trafford and Glasgow that explains how it can be a third cheaper to treat someone for a year in Trafford?"

Continued:

People who are in favour of competition, whether that's competition within the NHS or competition by introducing private providers, say the cheaper costs in England are because of that competition."

Eleanor Bradford went on to tell viewers that the cost of reform in England was £1.4billion but said the UK Government had argued that the savings would be over three times as much.

"All that they say will be offset by the savings. They expect to make savings of around £5billion by 2015, and that's savings in staff costs alone.

Now devolution allows governments to arrange health policies that suit their own nations, but the ultimate question is whether these policies actually produce better services and better outcomes for patients.

I've been looking at some of the changes in England and finding out what they have achieved."

There then followed a special item in which the BBC Scotland reporter spoke to several patients south of the border. All had nothing but praise for the care they were receiving.

Eleanor Bradford told viewers the following:

*"In Somerset, a service for people with chronic breathing problems is run by the **private healthcare firm BUPA.**"*

*"In England, more than three in every one hundred operations is now carried out in the **private sector.** In Scotland it's three in a thousand. And that's just hospital operations. It's estimated in England that one pound in every twenty of health spending is spent **outside the NHS.** In Scotland that figure's not even recorded."*

*"[Cornwall's] out-of-hours GP service [is] run by the **healthcare multi-national Serco.***

*Here in Cornwall, **private companies** care for people with respiratory conditions and before some routine operations. Even childcare services **put out to tender.**"*

You can see at a glance the thrust of the BBC Scotland news report was about privatisation. BUPA and Serco, are two of the biggest private healthcare firms in the UK. That was what the broadcast was about, not care.

I'll return to the exchanges between Dr Robertson and the BBC shortly. But I want to expand on a report Dr Robertson cited when addressing the BBC's challenge to his conclusion on the NHS news item. The academic mentioned the *Huitson* report *from 2012*. I want to reproduce part of a Newsnet Scotland article published in October of that year that highlighted this very report. It may give a clue as to why BBC Scotland chose to broadcast the very specific news report relating to the apparent 'benefits' of privatisation in the NHS.

Here is the segment from the Newsnet Scotland article:

What was BBC Scotland doing not just reporting on the English NHS, but apparently trumpeting reforms being pushed through by the UK government? It was a puzzle until Newsnet Scotland came across a little known report that had been compiled by a respected freelance journalist.

The report by Oliver Huitson gave a clue as to the reasons the reforms were given such an uncritical high profile. Huitson's investigation didn't look at BBC Scotland, more's the pity, instead it focused on the UK BBC's reporting of matters relating to the English NHS – especially these very reforms. According to Mr Huitson, he discovered evidence of widespread bias and censorship on the part of the state broadcaster in favour of UK Government reforms to the English NHS.

The report uncovered evidence that suggested:

- **the BBC failed to report on the lack of democratic mandate for the changes to the English NHS**
- **the broadcaster consistently presented the bill using the UK government's own highly contested description**
- **links between healthcare firms, the Conservatives and the House of Lords were never reported**
- **the significant role of the private sector in the new health market was never explored**
- **the role of private firms in creating the bill was never examined or reported**
- **sources with significant links to private healthcare were presented without a disclosure of their interests**
- **lobbyists were used in place of genuine impartial experts**
- **stories were reported that were biased**
- **the BBC censored other important stories**

Continued:

The published report begins:

In the two years building up to the government's NHS reform bill, the BBC appears to have categorically failed to uphold its remit of impartiality, parroting government spin as uncontested fact, whilst reporting only a narrow, shallow view of opposition to the bill. In addition, key news appears to have been censored. The following in-depth investigation provides a shocking testimony of the extent to which the BBC abandoned the NHS.

Some of the accusations the report levels at the BBC will be familiar to readers of Newsnet Scotland. In short, the report effectively accuses the BBC of breaching its own charter, which calls on the broadcaster to report impartially.

One story that the BBC allegedly ignored was revealed by Channel 4 News who reported:

"GPs say they have firm evidence now that the government is planning to privatise the National Health Service as part of its reforms... In a document seen by Channel 4 News, plans are laid out for how services will be bought for patients... Under the NHS reforms, GP practices will form consortia and they will manage about 60 per cent of England's NHS budget. But it has been acknowledged that some GPs will not want to – or be capable of – managing such huge enterprises."

The report also cited an excellent piece by Media Lens, entitled *The End Of The NHS: Buried By The BBC*, in which they note of the NHS reform Bill:

"On the very day the bill passed into law, the tag line across the bottom of BBC news broadcasts said 'Bill which gives power to GPs passes'. The assessment could have come from a government press release, spin that has been rejected by an overwhelming majority of GPs. The BBC has also repeatedly failed to cover public protests, including one outside the Department of Health which stopped the traffic in Whitehall for an hour."

Continued:

This is the reform that BBC Scotland was pushing as an improvement that Scotland ought to be pursuing and this investigative report makes it clear that there was more to these reforms than the state broadcaster would admit. Whilst BBC Scotland gave a brief mention of objections south of the border to these reforms, it did not explain the extent of these objections, which appears to have been considerable.

Far from supporting these reforms, most GPs in England are against them as this article in the Guardian makes clear.



Three-quarters of GPs want health and social care bill withdrawn, poll reveals

Most doctors surveyed say the Royal College of GPs and other medical groups should call for the bill to be scrapped

Indeed the phrase, ‘empowering GPs’ used by the BBC to describe the reforms is also challenged by Professor Colin Leys, author of *The Plot Against the NHS*, who when asked by the report’s author whether he considered the BBC’s line to be accurate and balanced. He replied:

“The BBC routinely described the Bill as a reform to empower GPs – the government’s description – rather than as turning the NHS into a market driven by shareholder interests, which was what the critics maintained – accurately, as is now becoming clear. The BBC’s public service remit should surely have required it at least to present the Bill’s purpose as contested.”

Continued:

According to the report, the episode “marks the culmination of the BBC’s slide into a far more traditional ‘state broadcaster’, an organisation afraid to challenge power and terrified of controversy. In its reporting of domestic affairs the BBC seems resigned to the role of a bland and compliant megaphone for established interests.”

“A compliant megaphone for established interests” – the phrase jumps out at the reader, especially those of us forced to endure BBC Scotland’s very peculiar brand of impartiality and balance and where censorship, in the shape of closing down Scottish online forums, is still allowed despite non-Scottish forums remaining open.

The report, which should be read to be appreciated, begged the question: Was BBC Scotland pushing English NHS reforms at the behest of its London controllers?

It was quite a thought provoking article and offered a believable explanation as to why BBC Scotland suddenly developed an interest in private healthcare in England. I’ll return to the issue of the NHS and BBC Scotland in the final chapter. For now though, back to the exchanges between BBC Scotland and the academic whose study the corporation was trying to discredit, and was refusing to report. Another area of the study challenged by BBC Scotland related to the use of so-called experts and academics.

[BBC]

*The report then makes a wide-sweeping claim that it found “**little evidence**” of the use of “**independent, academic or scientific**” sources in referendum reporting “**and where there was, there was clear tendency to use anti-independence over pro-independence evidence.**”*

Expert sources are regularly used by BBC Scotland where and when it is relevant and appropriate to do so and/or they are cited within reports offered by BBC correspondents and editors.

[Dr Robertson]

Reporting Scotland referred to such sources only 26 times out 365 broadcasts. Of these 22 offered evidence against the yes position.

[BBC]

*To suggest that the “**tendency**” is to use “**anti-independence over pro-independence evidence**” is another un-contextualised claim made without reference to supporting evidence.*

[Dr Robertson]

22 references to reports from The Treasury, IFS, OBR, MoD and only 4 from the Scottish government suggests a very marked imbalance.

It was clear that there was an imbalance in favour of anti-independence organisations and experts. So how did the BBC justify the one-sided nature of the news reports?

[BBC]

The proposals for independence, as laid out in Scotland's Future, published by the Scottish government, are currently setting the terms for the debate and are consequently receiving a considerable degree of scrutiny. Such proposals as the opponents of independence bring forward, either collectively or individually, will also be subject to debate and analysis.

[Dr Robertson]

'Will be' is not good enough. Why have they been presented so tamely so far?

[BBC]

These proposals for change, from either side, will inevitably attract a greater degree of scrutiny than the status quo.

[Dr Robertson]

Why?

This was a short, but key exchange. BBC Scotland was effectively justifying the one-sided nature of its expert analysis. The broadcaster's claim that opponents of independence had not yet brought forward 'proposals', so could not be analysed, was semantic codswallop. Those opposed to independence had proposed that a yes vote would bring about chaos. From September 2012 until September 2013 the anti-independence movement had made a host of claims relating to the 'threat' of independence. All kinds of doomsday predictions had been headlined by the BBC with barely a shred of scrutiny.

Some academics, despite their very clear past links to the Labour party, were invited by BBC Scotland to provide neutral economic analysis. But when introduced to the viewer or listener, the political links were never revealed.

One such academic was Professor John McLaren who was a senior member of an academic group called the Centre of Public Policy for Regions - or CPPR for short. The CPPR was a think-tank which was based at Glasgow University. Professor McLaren and his colleagues at the CPPR were regular contributors to BBC Scotland. The think-tank issued regular reports into Scotland's finances which were usually headlined by BBC Scotland.

It's fair to say that the CPPR's analysis was often controversial and viewed by many Yes supporters as being unhelpful their campaign. But what was never highlighted by BBC Scotland was Professor McLaren's links to the Labour party.

- John McLaren worked as a researcher for the Labour Party for a year leading up to the first election (1999) of the new Scottish Parliament, being subsequently appointed as a Special Adviser by Donald Dewar, and then by Henry McLeish, for the period up to 2001.
- He was a member of the Labour Party from 2000 to 2005.
- In 2006 Mr McLaren was hired by the Labour Party on a consultancy basis to undertake work leading up to the 2007 Scottish election.
- Mr McLaren's CPPR colleague, Jo Armstrong, was an adviser to Labour First Minister, Jack McConnell.

In February 2011, journalist Joan McAlpine, who would later go on to become an SNP MSP, wrote the following regarding Mr McLaren's CPPR colleague Jo Armstrong.

“Jo Armstrong, has also worked for the Fraser of Allander Institute, another academic organisation that appears to employ a disproportionate number of folk of a Scottish Labour persuasion...Now I am not saying that Ms Armstrong has done anything wrong. But I do believe that anyone presented with her work has a right to view it in the wider context of her career.”

There is considerable personnel cross over between the Fraser of Allander, the CPPR, and the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution which was set up by the Unionist parties to block moves to give Scotland more control of her own resources and economic decision making. The Calman Commission report forms the basis of the Scotland Bill, currently going through Westminster which the Scottish government says would have resulted in Scotland losing £8bn in the first ten years of devolution.”

The image shows a screenshot of the BBC News website. The top navigation bar includes the BBC logo, a 'Sign in' button, and links for News, Sport, Weather, iPlayer, TV, and Radio. Below this is a red 'NEWS' header with a navigation menu: Home, UK, World, Business, Election 2015, Tech, Science, Health, Education, and Entertainment. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column features a large image of an offshore oil rig at sea, with a red speaker icon overlaid. Below the image is the headline 'Academic John McLaren casts doubt on long term oil and gas revenues'. The right column features a headline 'Scottish independence: Debt dump worth more than oil, says CPPR' with a sub-headline '© 15 April 2014 | Scotland politics'. Below this headline is another image of an offshore oil rig with a flare.

It didn't mean that the CPPR or anyone connected with the academic think-tank was producing politically motivated analysis. It did though suggest an alarming lack of transparency at BBC Scotland. When newspaper journalist George Kerevan, an expert on economic matters, appeared on a BBC programme he was almost always introduced as a former SNP candidate. When newspaper journalist Alf Young, another who specialised in economic matters, appeared on the same BBC programme, his former role as a Labour party researcher wasn't mentioned.

Reading through the BBC's list of challenges to Dr Robertson, one had the impression of an organisation in complete denial. That Dr Robertson took the time to respond, at times showing understandable annoyance, was creditable.

The exchanges between the BBC and Dr Robertson then turned to a rather un-savoury episode that had marred the referendum campaign. Coincidentally it also involved the haranguing of another academic by the Scottish media. I'll let you read the exchanges between Dr Robertson and the BBC before I elaborate on this story.

[BBC]

However, to label such interrogation of evidence as 'anti-independence' is to fail to take account of the context within which such activity takes place.

*To support its contention that "**there was clear tendency to use anti-independence over pro-independence evidence**" the report cites the following example: "**a Glasgow University academic was 'outed' as having been 'bought' by the SNP to support the independence case (Reporting Scotland, 21/8/13).**"*

We would make three points here regarding accuracy:

** the date is wrong – the piece in question was broadcast on 22/8/2013, not 21/8/2103;*

[Dr Robertson]

OMG as the young people say.

[BBC]

** the word 'outed' appears nowhere in the broadcast;*

[Dr Robertson]

A pretty good choice of vocabulary I think to describe the report but not in the report, nor quoted in an attempt to deceive the reader.

[BBC]

** and it was the Yes Campaign (as stated in the programme), not the SNP (as stated in the UWS report), who paid Dr Bulmer.*

[Dr Robertson]

Again, is this all you've got?

[BBC]

Dr Bulmer appeared in the programme and robustly defended his position. We would regard the broadcast report as entirely accurate and impartial. In both the broadcast report and the commentary that followed, equal attention was paid to the allegations that the Yes Scotland campaign communications were hacked - this was not just a story about Dr Bulmer's fee.

[Dr Robertson]

My full comment was: 'Indeed the IFS was referred to as a 'well-respected think tank' (Reporting Scotland, 19/11/12) whereas a Glasgow University academic was 'outed' as having been 'bought' by the SNP to support the independence case (Reporting Scotland, 21/8/13). I stand by my interpretation of the 'outing' but the main point was about balance in the respect accorded to different sources.

The academic being referred to was Dr Elliott Bulmer. Dr Bulmer was a constitutional expert who had written extensively on the issue in relation to an independent Scotland. The academic was also in favour of independence, and had said so publicly. In the summer of 2012 he was asked by Yes Scotland if he would be prepared to write an article on his area of expertise which was to be published by the Herald newspaper.

Dr Bulmer agreed and requested a small fee for his time. The subsequent article - ***A Scottish constitution to serve the common weal*** – was published on July 13th and not surprisingly given Dr Bulmer's background, was favourable to the independence campaign. However, four months later a full scale smear operation was set in motion, which was covered extensively by BBC Scotland.



Scottish independence: Academic Elliot Bulmer says newspaper fee 'not a bung'

The smear was based on the fee Dr Bulmer had been paid by Yes Scotland. The Herald article had made no mention of the payment, and this, claimed the No campaign, was evidence of deceit. The word 'bung' used in the BBC headline was a reference to a comment made by Better Together campaign director, Blair McDougall.

McDougall had issued a statement which read:

“What other supposedly independent voices are being paid bungs to say what the Nationalists want? What else are they willing to do to deceive the people of Scotland?”

It was a classic smear. The anti-independence campaign had taken a perfectly appropriate payment and twisted it to make it look like a bribe. Dr Bulmer hadn't amended his views to suit Yes Scotland, he already held them. The small payment was for the time he had to spend drafting his views into an article which could be published by a national newspaper.

The attack from Blair McDougall wasn't surprising given the type of campaign he and his colleagues at Better Together had been running. What was surprising, notwithstanding the BBC's questionable handling of the referendum, was that the accusation had slipped so easily into BBC Scotland news headlines. Even more shocking was that it had eclipsed the real story, which was how Mr Bulmer's fee came to be in the public domain in the first place. The information had been gleaned by someone who had hacked into an email account belonging to a member of the official Yes Scotland campaign.

The Scottish police had been called in to investigate the security breach. The IT security breach led to the closing down of the Yes campaign's entire online operation as officers sought to establish how it had happened and the identity the culprit. Despite this, the smear became the dominant feature of the BBC story. The illegal hacking of the Yes campaign official's email account was marginalised. The media in Scotland including the BBC, appeared unable, or unwilling, to distinguish real news from a politically motivated attack. But what was the truth behind the article written by Dr Bulmer?

The accusation that the Yes campaign had deceived the public by paying the academic £100 for his time, was ludicrous. Yes hadn't offered the money unilaterally, Dr Bulmer had requested the fee, as he was perfectly entitled to do. The academic was hardly going to alter his views on the constitution for a small amount of money. Moreover the Herald newspaper had been notified prior to publication that Dr Bulmer had requested a fee for writing the article, but in keeping with its policy the newspaper had declined to pay.

If the newspaper wanted to, it could have sought confirmation from Yes Scotland that a fee had been paid. Informing the Herald that Dr Bulmer had requested a fee was a pretty poor attempt to deceive.

There was a secondary aspect to the smear. There were accusations that the article had misled readers by not declaring the academic's pro-independence leanings or the fact that it had been commissioned and offered to the Herald by Yes Scotland.

It was of course up to the Herald newspaper whether to publish this information in the form of a by-line or other. Yes Scotland hadn't withheld it from the newspaper. Rather embarrassingly though for the official No campaign, it later emerged its own campaign director had, some months earlier, written an article for the Guardian newspaper in which he had attacked independence.



Unfortunately Blair McDougall omitted to inform readers of his official role with Better Together.

But back to the exchanges between Dr Robertson and the BBC. The corporation had defended its coverage of the smear by insisting Dr Bulmer had appeared on Reporting Scotland and robustly defended his position. It missed the point. What was BBC Scotland doing promoting the politically motivated smear in the first place? If Yes Scotland wished to commission an academic to write an article then that was up to the campaign group. If the academic wished to request a small fee for his time then that was up to the academic. It wasn't news.

Better Together had plenty of sympathetic media outlets willing to headline their attack. Pro-Union newspapers were having a field day with the smear, as they were perfectly entitled to do. STV also reported on the story on its evening news although it concentrated less on the Better Together attack and more on the hacking aspect of the story. An online article by STV - **'Hacked' Yes Scotland email was about paying academic to write article** - focused heavily on the illegal hacking of the Yes campaigner's email account. The commercial broadcaster was capable of distinguishing politically motivated smear from real news.

BBC Scotland wasn't. The smear was the main thrust of its news reports. It defended its coverage by insisting "equal attention" had been paid to the hacking aspect of the story. But were both stories deserving of equal coverage? The Bulmer fee was lawful. It had entered the public domain after having been acquired through a criminal act. It was then manipulated and repackaged as a 'bung', courtesy of the Better Together campaign.

But how had the information been acquired by the media? The Yes campaign had been alerted to the possible security breach when a newspaper journalist asked about the Bulmer fee. Officials at Yes Scotland realised the information could only have been acquired through hacking.

Days after the smear appeared, Newsnet Scotland revealed Dr Bulmer himself had been contacted by a journalist from a UK national newspaper asking about his fee - before the details had entered the public domain. Who supplied these journalists with details of the fee was never established. That was the real story. It was more newsworthy than a political smear by a country mile. Indeed, given the fury over phone-hacking, it deserved far more coverage than it eventually received.

Let's return to the exchanges between Dr Robertson and the BBC. The corporation had taken issue with the academic's view on its personalisation of the independence referendum as Alex Salmond's.

[BBC]

The next part of the UWS report equates, in a rather simplistic way, 'personalisation' and 'demonisation' which it suggests, in broadcast reports, has the effect of 'undermining' the individual: it then applies this theory in its interpretation of Reporting Scotland output.

*In this process, it notes that **"The tendency by opposition politicians to attempt to undermine the Yes campaign by labelling its ambitions as Alex Salmond's desires is, in part, beyond the editorial role"**. Nevertheless it argues that the broadcasters are complicit in this process – **"it was common for reporters and presenters to adopt the same style:"***

Independence is the stated aim of the Scottish government, of which Alex Salmond, as First Minister, is the head. He is, as such, a recognised voice for the independence argument and he has publicly stated his personal and political belief in independence.

No one such figure is as easily identifiable for the anti-independence argument, given that three main political parties are involved, each with its own political agenda.

However, to suggest, as the report does, that for the BBC, as broadcaster, to present Alex Salmond's personal and political desires as one within the independence argument and that that is, somehow, part of a strategy to "undermine" him as a political figure, is yet another argument wholly without substance.

[Dr Robertson]

I think it is a strategy by the other parties and their strategic advisers to weaken the yes campaign by this technique. I think the historical examples I give show that it works.

I don't think the BBC reporters are likely to be part of this plan but rather that they have lazily adopted it. It's not good enough to say no one figure is as easily identifiable for the No campaign. It would be simple to stop saying Alex Salmond so much and just refer instead to the Scottish government or the Yes Campaign.

There wasn't much to add to Dr Robertson's short rebuttal. Alex Salmond was not the Yes campaign. That he was a figure of considerable profile was not in doubt, but the referendum was never 'Alex Salmond's referendum'. BBC reporters north and south of the border had been lazily using the phrase. As this book has already explained, the anti-independence movement was trying to present the referendum as Alex Salmond's. Several anti-Salmond smear stories had been cultivated in parallel. Salmond was variously portrayed as a liar, a dictator or a demagogue who was planning to create a fascist Nazi style state. If the referendum could be personalised then some might balk at voting Yes.

Both the BBC and Dr Robertson drew the exchange to a close.

[BBC]

*The report closes on a distillation of many of its earlier arguments, though, again with no evidence cited, it makes further allegations, that Alex Salmond is "**often portrayed as selfish and undemocratic**" and concludes that Reporting Scotland alerts "**typically**" contain "**a Westminster scare story, on the Yes campaign**" that are "**most-ly left unanswered and unchallenged**".*

To suggest this is to suggest that BBC Scotland is constantly in breach of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines (and Ofcom's Broadcasting Code), its news decisions determined by an editorial imperative to favour one argument over another, the result of which would be hundreds of editorial transgressions every year.

It is a suggestion completely without merit.

*The UWS report's closing remarks are worthy of consideration. It refers to its conclusions as based "**on the objective evidence presented here**".*

There is little, if any, objective evidence presented within the report: on the contrary, it is, in fact, highly subjective and selective in its approach and in its assessment of broadcast output.

[Dr Robertson]

As discussed earlier I accept a degree of subjectivity is unavoidable despite my best efforts. My evidence is as objective as that produced by any research in the field of social and political research. I suspect that it compares well with the pronouncements of those charged to defend corporate interests.

[BBC]

*Finally, for it to suggest that the “**evidence**” it claims to have uncovered points to a conclusion that “**coverage seems likely to have damaged the Yes campaign**” is to draw the report to a close on another wholly unsubstantiated contention, which is based on conjecture rather than any empirical evidence.*

There is no evidence whatsoever in the report that it has conducted any research or that it has otherwise collected substantive evidence that bears out this conclusion.

It does not indicate what it means by ‘damage’ - reputational, in terms of voting intentions, etc? If the latter, how can it arrive at that conclusion without having first assessed the voting intentions of the electorate and then clearly demonstrated a causal link between changes in those intentions, over a period of time, and the direct influence of broadcast output over that same period?

In short, the report concludes with a guess.

[Dr Robertson]

Reporting Scotland’s Brian Taylor is regularly asked what the impact of events such as the recent Bank of England governor’s speech in Scotland will have. He rarely hesitates, he gives only anecdotal evidence and is left unchallenged before a mass audience. No harm to him, but I think my evidence base is somewhat stronger.

[BBC]

Overall, it fails to provide any evidence, at all, that would support its main contentions.

[Dr Robertson]

I think I’ve answered all the questions needed to contest these conclusions. Social research is unavoidably subjective to some degree but we have done our best to reduce the level. The BBC response is a remarkably heavy-handed reaction. Why did they not report the research, let their experts critique it on air and then ask me to defend it? Instead we see a bullying email to my employer and a blanket suppression across the mainstream media in the UK. I’m shocked.

Continued:

There have been in excess of 30,000 hits on internet reports linking to my research. I've had more than 100 direct emails and around 400 blog responses suggesting a wide popular discontent with TV coverage of the Scottish Independence Referendum and in most cases suggesting I've understated the imbalances and bias. I've had only one comment really disagreeing with me.

I started out to gather the data, code it, sort it and report it in the professional and impartial style I have learned in 30 years of higher education. I deliberately avoided reflecting too much as I worked. Remember, I spent most of my days on unrelated tasks. The level of imbalance and the presence of propagandising techniques such as the demonisation of Alex Salmond, which emerged as I processed the first year's data, did not surprise me. Remember I am a student of propaganda and media compliance in more oppressive contexts such as Russia and the Middle East or Europe in the early 20th Century.

My team is small, low budget and part-time. I take responsibility for a small number of factual errors in writing up but these are of no consequence for the overall conclusion which is that Reporting Scotland and STV have produced over one year an account of the independence debate which favours the No campaign.

BBC Scotland management refused to accept there were any shortcomings in the station's coverage of the referendum. According to the broadcaster, the research contained nothing of worth. It was dismissed wholesale. Dr Robertson's study never featured in any news bulletin. There were no online articles and no special reports on Reporting Scotland. The only mention of the academic study was a short radio interview early on a Saturday morning.

BBC Scotland *had* though shown considerable interest in the research to the extent that it had clearly targeted considerable resource in compiling a lengthy list of challenges. But what was this resource? Who had carried out the work? Well the answer was every bit as shocking as the study the BBC was trying to discredit. It emerged the broadcaster had used staff who had been recruited specifically to help with referendum coverage. In 2013 BBC Scotland announced it had secured £5m of extra funding from the licence fee which was to be used to recruit fifteen trainees to help increase its referendum coverage. In a statement at the time, BBC Scotland said:

"We will be offering high quality training provided and supported by the BBC College of Journalism and senior BBC News staff, as well as the chance to learn on the job. These posts represent an excellent opportunity for trainees to gain valuable experience and to make a contribution to the BBC's coverage of such a significant story."

But shortly after the BBC launched its attack on Dr Robertson, former BBC presenter Derek Bateman revealed some of the extra staff had been dragooned and ordered to go over the news broadcasts and the research. According to Bateman BBC Scotland chiefs had used raw recruits in an effort at compiling evidence which would be used to discredit Dr Robertson's study.

Bateman said:

“Remember these are all novice broadcast people who are being trained on the job, having never worked in the industry before.

Now some are being asked to make judgements about the content, tone and balance of programme output when they simply don't have the experience in journalism to know if a news item is being personalised, if it's weighted to one side and has enough independent content or indeed if an expert can fairly be described as independent.

These are judgements only an experienced professional could make and, as I have written before, this work needs to be monitored by an independent academic source.”

Notwithstanding the lack of interest from the traditional media, the matter was hugely embarrassing for BBC Scotland. Bosses were later invited to appear before Holyrood's Culture Committee where they faced questions relating to the BBC's referendum coverage. In March 2014 BBC Scotland Head Ken MacQuarrie appeared alongside head of News and Current Affairs John Boothman.

I watched the proceedings as MacQuarrie launched a scathing attack on the academic integrity of, by now, Professor John Robertson. Not surprisingly, there was no sign of contrition from management at Pacific Quay. And why should there have been. According to them their coverage of the referendum was fair, flawless, balanced and impartial. Commenting on Professor Robertson's work, MacQuarrie told MSPs:

“The evidence it presents does not support the contentions it makes. Its conclusions are based largely on flawed analysis or occasionally intuitive guesswork. It is not a piece of analysis based on empirical research, as it claims to be, but rather a highly subjective and selective assessment of our news coverage.”

On the email sent to Professor Robertson and the Principal of the University, which the academic had described as intimidating and insulting, McQuarrie said:

“The content and the tone of our communication was also entirely proper.”

However pressed by Committee Chair Stewart Maxwell, the BBC Boss was forced to admit that Robertson's study was the only academic research that had ever been questioned in the manner it had by the broadcaster. MacQuarrie and Boothman were also forced to admit that five trainee journalists recruited by BBC Scotland to help with referendum coverage, had instead been ordered to scrutinise the academic's work.

Writing in the Scottish Review days earlier, political commentator Gerry Hassan said of both BBC and STV's coverage of the referendum:

“There is a historical background in the way that the BBC responded to the creation of the Scottish Parliament over the 'Scottish Six' with senior management colluding in a centralist interpretation of the UK and minimal one of political devolution; STV, while not having the specific focus of the 'Scottish Six', responded with similar lack of imagination.

Then there is the story of the retreat from populist mediated access programmes to the specialist, incestuous, self-reverential shows of the last 15 years. The question that is seldom asked and hasn't been in the last week is that, given the talents of many of the journalists involved in these programmes, who is responsible for this failure of format and commissioning?

The answer is the senior management of BBC and STV who have both failed to invest and nurture in the talent, imagination and drive in their stations over the last decade plus. It is BBC and STV managements who are responsible for the calamitous choice of formats on the referendum, consistently opting for unimaginative, adversarial, rhetorically empty exchanges which put politicians and partisanship first and foremost.

This is a product of the absence of a culture and practice of programmes which put the public first, in the studio, and which takes risks with formats and styles.”

In STV's defence, it had to compete in the commercial market. It received no hand-out in the form of a TV licence fee. BBC Scotland had no such excuse, its income was guaranteed. When its performance was criticised, its response was to attack the integrity of the academic who dared speak out.