

EDITORIAL PROCESSES – HOW BBC NEWS WORKS

This document sets out the way that editorial decisions are taken in BBC News. At one level, the process is straightforward; the final decision about what to broadcast is taken by the editor of each area of output – whether it be a programme, a strand on a continuous news network or an online section. As the Neil Review of BBC Journalism reaffirmed in 2004, the editors are the “gatekeepers”. But BBC editors take the decisions they do in the context of the core BBC values that should drive all our journalism – truth and accuracy; serving the public interest; impartiality and diversity of opinion; independence; and accountability. They operate within an overarching framework of direction, guidance, policy and strategy which is set by senior management and approved and monitored by the BBC Trust (and formerly the Governors). Decision-making is a process of delegated editorial responsibility, with considerable checks and balances.

Helen Boaden
Director, BBC News

(22nd January, 2007)

Editorial Policy and the College of Journalism under the direction of the Deputy Director-General. It is the chief policy-making forum for all journalistic matters within the BBC. Meetings are held twice a month.

The News Editorial Board, led by the Director of News, meets fortnightly to discuss key editorial themes, make key operational decisions and evaluate output. It feeds into the Journalism Board and ensures that editorial decisions taken there are disseminated throughout departments. On specific issues, it also develops policy which is then fed through to the Journalism Board for approval.

News Editorial Board is also an occasion for assessment of impartiality issues, giving the opportunity to identify gaps and ways to improve coverage. When they arise, the Board also evaluates serious complaints and how they have been handled.

Across the BBC's journalism as a whole, the "Big Stories" meeting, led by the Deputy Director-General, provides a monthly forum for executives and specialist editors from News, Global News and Nations & Regions to confer on the major themes and stories of the year and to take decisions about priorities.

Editorial Policy also organizes a pan-BBC monthly meeting for discussion of editorial policy developments and issues, attended by key editorial staff from across the BBC. This is a key way in which Editorial Policy decisions are disseminated and the minutes are widely distributed.

Role of Editors

Day-to-day responsibility for the output of radio and television programmes, bulletins and news channels and for the content of the BBC News website sections rests with individual editors, operating within the framework of our values and with the guidance and direction of management. They have a substantial support structure in terms of editorial, technical, legal and other advice, and the ability to refer up, but decisions are made by programme or section editors and they are accountable for what is published. In exceptional circumstances (eg the Danish cartoons controversy, Saddam Hussein's execution) senior management will direct what is to be broadcast after discussing the issues.

Newsgathering

Most daily news coverage (that is, reportage as opposed to interviews) is provided by the Newsgathering department, which, with 41 overseas bureaux and 7 bureaux in the UK, is the world's most powerful newsgathering operation. Newsgathering relies on the knowledge, ingenuity and expertise of its 600 correspondents, reporters, producers and technical staff who make it possible to report from every corner of the world - including many hostile and inaccessible locations. It acts as an agency servicing the full range of the output. Newsgathering offers material from the field via co-ordinating intake desks in London; and likewise these relay requests from output areas to the bureaux.

Political newsgathering comes under a separate department, Political Programmes, based in Millbank, with its own intake desk and employing 12 full-time correspondents.

All daily news programmes on network radio and television are entitled to receive from Newsgathering a news service on the main stories of the day. Newsgathering does not have sufficient resources to give every programme and channel everything it requests.

For breaking news, where only a single correspondent is available, outlets are serviced according to a list of priorities. For domestic news, the correspondent first records a summary - a "generic minute" - for use by all outlets and then priority is given firstly to Radio 5 Live, then BBC News 24 and decisions thereafter are taken according to which programmes are on air. For foreign news, after the "generic minute", priority is given to World Service and then to any of the main domestic programmes which happens to be on air (e.g. Today, The Six O'Clock News etc.)

For planned events, Newsgathering deploys with a view to servicing all TV and radio outlets, consistent with the importance of the story, the costs, and the logistical factors.

Newsgathering arrangements with News Interactive are different. The nature of News Interactive means that it has to keep current stories up to date 24 x 7 - it is all too transparent if they are not - and in order to do this, core news coverage is produced by the Interactive team in Television Centre in London, drawing heavily on the material filed by Newsgathering correspondents. It has its own intake team which works closely with the main Newsgathering operation. In addition, in some cases the website section is physically located next to the Newsgathering operation rather than in the News Interactive newsroom on the 7th floor of Television Centre - this is true for Business, Health, Education, Technology and Science.

There is a similar set-up for political stories, with the News Interactive politics team based alongside the Political Programmes newsgathering operation in Millbank.

Given the strategic need to make on demand content a top priority, there are plans to embed News Interactive requirements much more significantly in future.

Editorial meetings

The main mechanism for the exercise of editorial control and for testing the accuracy, impartiality and balance of coverage is through scheduled daily and weekly meetings.

Members of the senior News management team meet every weekday at 0850. At this meeting, the Director and Deputy Director of News, heads of department and their deputies, plus senior representatives from Nations & Regions and from World Service, review coverage since the previous meeting and look ahead to the development of the news agenda. This is an opportunity to share any concerns about quality, tone and impartiality and to discuss where key stories are going. It's also a chance to get a snapshot of audience feedback from the BBC News website statistics, from programme and website audience responses and from the audience logs compiled by BBC Information.

The views and decisions taken at the 0850 meeting inform the departmental meetings of editors at 9.15, run by the heads of Television News, Radio News and News Interactive, which critique

coverage and plan the day ahead in much greater detail. Newsgathering, Millbank (Political Programmes) and News Interactive are represented at the television and radio meetings.

A second departmental meeting takes place in the afternoon (1500 for TV and 1630 for Radio and News Interactive) at which the on-going treatment of stories is assessed and plans for the rest of the day and the following morning's key output are reviewed. This provides another opportunity for departmental heads (or their deputies) to check on due prioritization and impartiality.

In addition to these meetings, all daily BBC News programmes, strands and BBC News website sections have their own meetings at which team members put forward ideas and suggestions for coverage.

There are regular weekly planning meetings in each department, attended by representatives from Newsgathering and Political Programmes, where there is discussion of that week's expected agenda. There is also discussion of one or two broader strategic editorial concerns, often determined by the decisions from the Big Stories forum. The purpose of this meeting is to make sure that coverage is not dominated exclusively by the rush of daily events. Representatives from radio-current affairs programmes also attend the radio meeting, partly with a view to ensuring that the knowledge and expertise residing in programmes is exploited by daily news and that the newsgathering skills of daily news are maximized by current affairs programmes when big stories break.

In Radio News there is a monthly Editorial Strategy meeting specifically to follow up on themes identified in the Big Stories meetings and to enable Newsgathering editors and specialists to talk to programme editors about their thinking on long term trends and themes.

Every month the Editors' Forum focuses in depth on a significant area of coverage, reviewing the past and looking ahead to how to develop themes in the future. Chaired by the Director of News, the forums started in March 2005 and are attended by up to fifteen different editors each month.

Sharing journalism

A substantial effort has been made over the last year to enable BBC News to achieve the maximum impact for the best of our journalism from wherever it emanates, whether it be current affairs programmes, daily news or the website. All programmes and website sections accept the need to spread the impact of their work by helping other areas of the output to report it and to follow it up. A dedicated assignment editor in UK Newsgathering now has the task of co-ordinating these efforts to make original BBC journalism available across the full range of outlets. She has a radio producer working with her full-time and draws on whatever production support she needs to deliver items for broadcast from within Newsgathering as and when she needs it. The BBC News website expects to reflect the best of BBC journalism on the site, and does this through the intake team or the programmes' website team. The site also produces much original journalism, and pushes this back into BBC News either through the intake team or the editors in the specialist sections.

Other influences, training and support for journalists

Role of Specialist Editors

BBC News has eight specialist editors whose job it is to advise on coverage of key story developments as well as being “trusted guides” on air. They provide regular briefings through emails and seminars etc. Currently the specialist editors are: :

College of Journalism

The College of Journalism was set up in 2005 to develop a far-reaching training programme for BBC journalists, covering BBC News, Global News, Nations and Regions and other relevant areas across the BBC. The “virtual” College provides interactive learning, workshops, seminars and public events delivered in BBC buildings or close to the workplace. In addition to core journalistic craft and production skills, the College focuses on ethics and values, and knowledge building on key themes and issues such as Europe and the Middle East. Its central offering is a website, CoJo online, which aims to make learning and development part of the fabric of the working day; BBC journalists are able to draw down the learning they want and need, wherever they work. The content – much of it provided by practising journalists - ranges from masterclasses on key skills to audio-visual case studies in which the individual can grapple with editorial dilemmas. The site has just launched (January 2007) with a basic offering and will grow quickly to reflect the full range of the BBC’s output.

Analysis & Research

BBC News invests in an Analysis and Research Department (A&R) which offers all journalists in-depth research and briefings on a very wide range of topics. Requests to A&R from BBC journalists range from advice on contributors and potential interviewees to background information and specific briefs.

A&R employs subject specialists who supply briefs for distribution via the A&R intranet website and a twice-daily email bulletin (which reaches over 2200 news journalists); maintain in-depth sites within the A&R website; organize seminars and roundtables for BBC journalists with senior politicians and academics; and respond to individual queries from journalists and programme-makers.

Leadership lunches

The Director of News holds monthly lunches open to all editors in BBC News at which leaders in their field are invited to give a talk on a key issue in which they have an expertise or just to shed light on their own business, followed by a question and answer session.

Accountability and transparency

BBC News has made complaints handling and accountability to audiences one of its top priorities.

Complaints

After the Neil Review of BBC Journalism and a further review of the BBC's complaints procedures, the BBC introduced a clearer and more rigorous process for the handling of complaints in February 2005. The Director of BBC News is an active member of the BBC-wide Complaints Management Board. Helen Boaden has given priority to ensuring that all complaints are taken seriously, that the division meets the BBC's Code of Practice on complaints, and that feedback from complaints is fed into editorial processes. This focus means that the learning issues which arise as a result of complaints inform the key editorial meetings and forums whenever appropriate.

Blogs and NewsWatch

In autumn 2004, BBC News launched the "NewsWatch" brand, consisting of a weekly programme on BBC News 24, presented by Ray Snoddy, and an accompanying public-facing feedback and accountability website. Encouraged by the success of Political Editor Nick Robinson's blog - promoted on both the front page of the BBC News website and in the politics section - it was decided to launch the Editors' Blog in summer 2006 as the key vehicle for responding rapidly to audience concerns. The aim is for output editors to explain the thinking behind their decisions in a discursive way, inviting audiences to share our editorial dilemmas and enter into dialogue as well as offering insights into the way we work. The blog entries are usually written by editors but senior BBC News managers contribute as well.

In future, more blogs by the specialist editors are planned, offering behind the scenes insights and other angles on stories that do not necessarily fit into more formal formats. The Business Editor, Robert Peston, and Economics Editor, Evan Davis, are both due to launch blogs in February.

BBC News: Delegated Editorial Decision Processes

