

The BBC and culture wars

Roundtable discussion with Debs Grayson, Tom Mills and Justin Schlosberg

What role have the culture wars played in the decline of BBC editorial standards?

The people taking part in this discussion are all part of the Media Research Coalition, which was established in 2011 during the Leveson Inquiry into phone hacking. For the past decade, MRC has produced research on media ownership and policy, and campaigned for a media that can be part of the solutions to the crises we face, rather than part of the problem. Since 2021, MRC has been running The BBC and Beyond, a campaign which seeks to re-imagine our media as a collectively owned and governed resource - 'a media commons'. Part of this campaign is a call for a 'People's BBC' - a BBC that has been radically devolved and democratised so that it can meet the needs of all the UK's communities. For more on a People's BBC and the campaign, go to <https://bbcandbeyond.net/>.

Debs: Let's start by discussing what we understand by culture wars. One way of understanding it is as a way of conducting politics where cultural and symbolic conflicts are used as a way of distracting from material issues - for example, making Brexit a question of flag-waving and blue passports rather than literally how goods should move around the island of Ireland. How do you tend to think about or define culture wars?

Tom: One difficulty is that they tend to make a general distinction between

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cultural difference and material concerns, whereas many instances of inequality - on issues such as race, gender or sexuality, for example - are themselves material issues, even though they are also wrapped up, of course, with questions of personal identity and heritage and origin. So I think we need to be a little bit cautious about how we respond to a framework which says that *these* are material issues and *these* things aren't.

In so far as I'm comfortable using the term 'culture wars', I would not want to subscribe to the view that it is about 'identity politics', especially as it is caricatured and dismissed by right-wing culture warriors. For me it is a question of the ways in which the dominant media institutions choose to discuss and highlight such cultural and political differences. Culture war is a particular way in which these issues get discussed - one that is depoliticising and polarising in an unhelpful way. But at the same time I would want to insist that the issues it refers to are material and real, and that the left should take them seriously.

Justin: I broadly agree with that. One of the risks of straying too far into the kind of discourses that are associated with culture wars, and indeed the way they polarise people around questions of 'identity politics', is that it can have the effect of erasing power. Culture-war discourse presents - and problematises - the way issues are dealt with in public service media, for example, as being a function of an ever more fractured socio-political landscape, rather than seeing them as a response by a neoliberal, or neoconservative, establishment to the breakdown in the kind of consensus politics that had previously underpinned western liberal society for so many decades.

Very often, culture wars rhetoric is a reaction - partly of the state, but more broadly of state-corporate power - to the increasingly myriad ways in which that power is open to challenge and scrutiny. And I would see it as part of a repressive turn in liberal democracies, whereby dissenting views and perspectives - whether on the left or the right - are subject to increasing flak, retaliation, delegitimization. And sometimes that looks like culture wars, but it's probably closer to a creeping authoritarianism.

If you look at the BBC's place within that process - and there is nothing particularly historically new about the BBC being broadly wedded to the interests of state-corporate power, or at least reflective of those interests - I think it's manifest in

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a quite demonstrable decline in basic editorial standards. My starting point for this is to look at the role of elite power in these culture wars, and explore how the BBC, and public service media in general, fit into that.

Debs: One of the things we want to do in these discussions is to try to talk about what the response should be - how can the left respond to culture wars? You've always got this question of 'well, what is the culture war?'. One response is to say that culture wars are not what is really happening, actually what is happening is repressiveness and authoritarianism. But the problem is that the idea of a culture war is being narrativised and talked about, and it is a framework that is being used to explain or justify repressive actions. And this puts you into a bind where everything you say within this context just gets reframed as 'well, that is you repeating your position in the culture war'. And if you say 'no, I don't think that's what's happening - I don't think I'm in a culture war with you', their response is 'well, that's proof that you're a woke snowflake'. What is a left response to this sort of thing?

In talking about the BBC more specifically, we can see that culture wars are only part of the political landscape. The BBC has been under pressure from the Conservative Party for a long time on the (unfounded) grounds that it is too liberal; so the idea of culture wars, and the BBC being in thrall to the woke, can in some ways be seen as part of this longer term process.

The decline in editorial standards that Justin mentioned is something that has a set of outputs, and is also something that is a result of a set of pressures, a political battle that has happened behind closed doors that we haven't seen, and that is constantly denied even though in some ways the pressure is very explicit ... the BBC Chair, the Director General, they both have these long-standing relationships with the Conservative Party, and now the newly appointed head of OFCOM was formerly a Conservative peer. And they say 'he's impartial' - and even that he's impartial enough not just to be impartial in his own judgements, but impartial enough to determine what impartiality is.

Tom: There's a set of different issues there. Number one is this question of how we deal with campaigning around the BBC when its editorial culture at the very top has been so profoundly politically compromised. And then there's the separate question of how you enter into debates around culture war issues. To me, if you take seriously

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the issues which are being discussed as ‘culture war’ issues, the left is under an obligation to intervene in those debates. But the problem that you face is that it’s precisely the nature of those institutions, and the way that the debates are being set up, that makes it, by design, very difficult to intervene.

That’s the dilemma, and I don’t think there’s a straightforward answer to that. You just have to go in, enter the debate as much as is necessary to be at the table and as much as you can, reject the underlying premises, and then remind people of the actual or material issues at stake. Sometimes that means making arguments around attacks on a given woke issue as being distractions from other issues, and, hopefully, in other cases it will mean trying to create more empathy with groups that are being targeted and marginalised as part of that reactionary response. And that, I think, is an ongoing dynamic - it’s not like the press have suddenly started attacking immigrants in the recent period. It’s easy to forget, with all the talk about culture wars in the contemporary period, the extent to which the reactionary press in this country has been an institutional driver of this stuff for decades.

We also need to remember that the expression of conservative social views is often a genuine response to a period of rapid social change around particular kinds of norms. It’s not purely a distraction - conservatives are genuinely incensed by the upheaval in certain forms of social relations, and we need to take that seriously.

There’s also a generational element to this, because younger people are locked out of institutions such as the BBC and the press, and all of these media institutions. It’s no coincidence that the audience for a lot of this stuff that we call the culture wars - let’s say, for example, the attitudes towards teaching about the British empire in history, statues being pulled down and so on - is the conservative base. There actually is a genuine culture war going on here. And on these kinds of political polarisation, what’s relatively new is a generational divide. I think the BBC simply doesn’t reflect those perspectives.

I take the point about the imposition of people at the BBC, but I would also want to point out that the right has always attacked people who represent a threat to elite interests. That’s just what the right does. Was it a culture war when the BBC junked all its editorial standards to attack Jeremy Corbyn and essentially convince everybody he was a Nazi? In one way you could say it was, but you could also argue that this is the role that media institutions have always tended to play. As Justin’s work has showed, the BBC were often as bad on this as the *Sun*.

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Justin, would you see the attacks on Corbyn and Corbynism as part of a culture war, or as something distinct?

Justin: I think it's distinct but related and I'll try and explain why. For me, it comes down to this word delegitimation. I feel quite strongly that a lot of what we think of and understand as culture wars is part of the neoliberal, neoconservative, reaction to the increasing distrust of, and challenge to, its main institutions of cultural authority, which includes the BBC, but also extends to Westminster, Fleet Street, etc.

That meant that the left, as represented by Corbyn between 2015 and 2019, had to be relentlessly delegitimated. And that delegitimation of Corbyn then made it really difficult for the left to connect with, or speak out to, the working-class heartlands in the 'Red Wall' seats. It positioned the left as the antithesis of working-class values. And, to an extent, I think the left allowed itself to fall into that trap, it didn't adequately resist it.

And I think the perfect example here is Brexit, which is another example of the way in which culture wars are a construction of those in power: what happened with Brexit is that perfectly legitimate lines of debate were delegitimised through being framed in culture-wars terms. Obviously, Brexit was driven in significant part by the racist anti-immigrant agenda that has been pedalled by the right-wing press for decades, but there was another dimension to arguments for Brexit that was based on a perfectly legitimate and important public concern, but was completely maligned and marginalised - which was the argument for democratic sovereignty, a concern also voiced by some on the left.

Most remain voters assumed that everyone who voted for Brexit just wanted to get rid of immigrants. The sovereignty argument got completely sidelined. So my response to the issue of how the left should respond to culture wars is to say that the failure of the left is that we've too often allowed ourselves to become entrenched in the cultural wars. Of course it is impossible not to get involved in questions around, for example, Black Lives Matter and the way in which challenging racism has been subject to assault from the right. But there has to be a way in which the left can articulate its progressive ideals - not just on economic issues but also in terms of the kinds of social issues that we are concerned with, whether that's trans rights, Black Lives Matter, immigration, or other issues - in a way that working-class people can relate to. And I feel that that sometimes the left has fallen into a culture-wars trap set by the right.

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And - to come back to the role of the BBC in the culture war surrounding Brexit - it too often gave space to the views of far-right nationalists supporting Brexit, as against those opposing the EU on the grounds of sovereignty. There was no voice, or no platform, given to the very important public debate about sovereignty. And much of the left just bought in to this delegitimisation of all Brexit arguments - which was actually coming from the liberal establishment.

Debs: It's absolutely true that the sovereignty debate wasn't given any space, although I don't necessarily agree that 'most' remain voters dismissed all leave voters as solely motivated by hating immigrants. But I would say that the self-identified Remainers who *did* buy into that polarisation of the debate were precisely the sorts of people that do cultural production at the BBC. And it was really palpable - I was listening to a BBC radio drama recently, an updated episode of *Our Friends in the North* set in 2022, and they did this thing that I've heard in a number of BBC dramas, where the writers appear to think that everybody that voted for Brexit did it for entirely racist reasons, and had no real reasons for it.

And the BBC also refuse to engage with questions over the Northern Ireland protocol in a way that takes seriously that there is a land border, and there has to be some solution to this that somehow doesn't violate the Good Friday agreement - and that there isn't one. When I think of the biggest failures of the BBC, I always think of the failure to tell the story of what the impacts of Brexit would be on Northern Ireland in the run-up to the referendum. And they still haven't made a single documentary that actually interrogates the multiple reasons why people voted to leave or remain, or hosted a serious discussion with voters from around the UK where they actually recognise the different impacts on the different nations.

I think there is a problem with the demographics of people that work at the BBC. And it's not that they're too left-wing, it's that they are liberals, and are very invested in a particular structure of power that we have, and they are not able to think critically. For example to think, okay, if sovereignty is the issue, maybe we need to be talking about the fact that Westminster is not a democratic institution, and we need far more devolution of power across the board. They are not able to engage critically with the fundamental tensions about the powers that are supposed to sit with the Scottish parliament, and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies, and why that placed making a joint decision about leaving the EU on a knife edge.

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And the question is - what resources do we have as the left to tell a different story about what has happened? What's going to happen when there's so little space for it?

Tom: I agree, and an important context for this is that well before Brexit, and before, for example, trans issues became a very prominent reactionary talking point in the British media, there was already this domination of the mainstream political spectrum by this social stratum, i.e. the affluent liberals who are essentially neoliberal on economics and liberal on social issues, like gay rights and so on. Those are the kinds of people who inhabit the BBC. They see the political spectrum as basically running from themselves to the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* - what you might call reactionary working-class and lower-middle-class perspectives. And the people who don't fit into that limited vision are, number one, the conservative affluent people of middle England, who constituted the majority of Brexit voters, and, number two, left-wing working-class and lower-middle-class people.

As far as I'm concerned, the way Brexit was framed was precisely to do with the distribution of political and communicative power in the institutions that we've been discussing. Who got to dominate the conversation and who was excluded? It was the people not included within the BBC's conception of the political spectrum mentioned just now by Justin who didn't get to speak. It was the perspectives which Justin summarised, with those ideas around sovereignty, and certain left-wing perspectives, that were marginalised.

The BBC see the debate as being solely between the relatively narrow perspectives that are in their Westminster bubble, and they have their points of reference there. If something appears in the *Guardian* - not from Owen Jones, of course, but other people at the *Guardian* - then that's respectable opinion. If it appears in the *Daily Mail* or the *Telegraph*, that's respectable opinion. These are the terms of political debate and it gives the right-wing press a huge influence.

I honestly think that a lot of the stuff which we call culture wars is just the right wing deciding that something's a big issue and then persuading everyone else of that by relentlessly banging on about it. The BBC then reflects that, trying to find a balance between some of the bat-shit ideas that come from the right - from the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Times* - and opinions from the political centre well represented at the *Guardian*. Maybe that's a slight over-simplification, but I think that that's how we get these strange dynamics.

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Justin: You could argue that what all of this culture war amounts to is a de-platforming, a de-legitimising, within a growing culture of intolerance that ultimately is shaped around the interests of elite liberal world-views - because, ultimately, what the BBC is there to do, and has always been there to do, is to draw a line that defines what is acceptable public discourse, what is acceptable public debate. And of course that is not going to map exactly onto the right-wing press agenda, but it does map onto the perspectives of an elite power world-view, which is that anything on the left or the right that fundamentally challenges the power structure has to be excluded, even when it is something perfectly legitimate, not in any way bigoted, and part of a rational political position.

If you take Covid, for example, of course the extremist rhetoric that the pandemic unleashed within the anti-vax movement should not be tolerated by any responsible media. However, that framing of anti-vax conspiracy theorists was then used to de-legitimise some sound critiques of what was happening - for example of what Pfizer was doing, or of the whole debate around the Covid origins. Anyone who questioned the mainstream orthodoxy that was reflected in the dominant narrative of the BBC and other liberal media as to what were the origins of Covid, or the policy of spending exorbitant amounts of public money on immensely profitable big pharma companies with virtually no public scrutiny or accountability - became labelled in the same way as anti-vax conspiracy-theorists. They all became excluded and marginalised from public debate.

And I think that very much speaks to my own personal experience in regard to disinformation over the Ukraine war. Of course it's no secret that Russia is peddling disinformation narratives. And of course there are commentators on the left and on the right who uncritically buy into those narratives, and uncritically amplify those narratives. But the problem then is that the BBC, once again, in a way that's similar to its response on Covid, adopts the position that literally any form of criticism in relation to UK or US foreign policy in Ukraine is by default delegitimate, is by default amplifying Putin's talking points.

So I think that the real lesson here for the left, and, ideally, for public service media, is that we have to be very careful about the instinct to close the door on particular perspectives that may appear to be unacceptable, but when you actually look at them, turn out to be perfectly reasonable - even if we disagree with them. The left must be more tolerant and accepting, for example, of the positions of some

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radical feminists in the debate about trans rights movements; and it must be more tolerant and accepting of arguments for democratic sovereignty in relation to Brexit. And what's happened to the left in the post-Corbyn, post-Sanders, era is that it's become extremely effectively contained by these processes of delegitimisation.

So, for example, it is remarkable that both Bernie Sanders and the squad have without question waved through unprecedented amounts of money for spending on arms companies that are generating huge profits, in the midst of an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis and imminent recession. There's not a single left-wing voice in Congress - and I think the same applies to parliament here - that is raising questions about the money being spent on military support for Ukraine. And all that does is give the ultimate gift to people like Trump, to people on the right, and indeed to Putin, who want to exploit that undercurrent of mistrust in the left amongst working-class, and many middle-class, people - that instinctive distrust, or that idea of hypocrisy that is so trumpeted in right-wing media narratives. The left is unintentionally fuelling those narratives by not resisting the effects of those cultural wars, or resisting that drive to delegitimisation

Debs: I definitely recognise those dynamics amongst the left. But I also think one of the difficulties that we've been talking about is the question of how to decide when something is a material concern and when is it a case of people actually talking about entirely different things.

For example, I am very deeply committed to trans rights, but I certainly don't want to chuck every radical feminist who has what I see as very problematic views on trans rights out of any left spaces. In fact, in the queer feminist spaces I'm in we've been talking for years about how we can have better conversations with a set of people that we know we should be on the same side as, and where the divides between us do feel on some level like a fundamental misunderstanding.

But the problem is that when we try to have conversations, the things that constantly get brought up are scenarios or problems that I believe to be fantasies. I'm trying to talk about the material conditions of being a trans person, and they're talking about a completely imaginary world in which trans people in toilets are the major source of sexual violence. And the problem is that the media environment does not give any space at all for having a conversation in which we might figure out our shared concerns about the rights of women and girls, and the ending of

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patriarchy. Instead, the first question that will be asked in a discussion is something about a completely imaginary situation in a toilet that has literally never happened.

Tom: This really does come, for me anyway, to the heart of the question around the culture war, which is that there are many substantive political issues over which there are differences, and these should be subjects dealt with by a public service broadcaster - which could bring the different issues and perspectives into a dialogue, and, hopefully, deflate some of the polarisation that exists. This is what the BBC always claims that it does, and what defenders of the BBC say that public service broadcasting will do. But that's not actually what takes place.

One recent example occurred when Kate Burley was interviewing Mick Lynch, the head of RMT, and asking 'what will your members do if agency workers try and cross the picket line?' What she wanted him to say was they would use violence to attack the agency workers, because, in her head, that was the proper way of discussing an industrial dispute - not, for example through a question asking what are the underlying material conditions of your members, or what has management policy been, or what would you be prepared to accept as a payoff or whatever. Or even a political contextualisation. The story is a conflict between violent picket line workers and people who want to work. And that was taken directly from that 1980s framework of how you deal with industrial disputes.

But this is exactly what happens all the time - things are so often discussed as if they were part of a completely imaginary thought-experiment, or they get played out at the level of the symbolic - and usually the sort of symbolic territory within which conservative interests are relatively comfortable.

So, as another example, think about some of the ways that monarchy gets portrayed on the BBC. One way is a recurring debate around people's attitudes to particular members of the Royal family - which plays on people's sense that they can relate to them. Or it can play out in terms of certain national symbols. I'm thinking, for example, of the big debate about some graduate students at Oxford who took down a picture of the queen from their common room. This became a talking point in the media.

The left should be able to engage in a debate around the social power of monarchy and the principle of monarchy in a political system. But that's not the debate that takes place. It becomes a culture war issue because it's elevated to the

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level of the symbolic. Then there should also be a debate around police brutality and structural racism. That's also not the conversation that the media want to have. They want to have a conversation about whether we should be pulling down statues of Winston Churchill. Now I personally have no problem with the left critiquing Winston Churchill or Tariq Ali writing a book about it - as a scholar, it's a question of whether something's correct or not. But I think, politically, in terms of informing public debate, having a debate about Winston Churchill is clearly not a good way to proceed. And to me that gets to the heart of the question of how the BBC hosts these debates. And of course the broader context for that is precisely what we were talking about earlier, which is the top-down imposition of political appointees at the BBC.

But it's not simply that those political appointees turned up and then the BBC's editorial standards got eroded. There's lots of reasons why the BBC's editorial standards are very bad. They've never had independence from the political system. So they're always trying to respond to debates among the elite in these kinds of ways, and this weights it against engaging in any rational political discussion - which might get to the points of conflict.

You might think that precisely what a liberal institution should be able to do is to host rational debate. But the problem with liberal institutions in actuality, as opposed to in theory, is that they are guilty of the power blindness that is also the hallmark of liberal theory. So the BBC is championed as being a liberal institution that can make impartial judgments about what debates get covered, and how they'll be covered. And in theory, yes, it should be able to do that. Why isn't it able to do that? Because actually it is not a free and liberal institution, even in the classic liberal sense. (Of course, I don't think we want it to be purely a liberal institution, we'd want it to be more democratic, but it is not even a proper liberal institution.) It's not able to make an independent, professional assessment as to what would be the best way to host a public debate around the kinds of issues that we've been talking about. It's never been free enough to be able to sensibly host issues.

You can't expect a quasi-state broadcaster like the BBC to host an impartial debate around trade union rights. It is just not going to happen, because the less powerful the people being discussed are, the less impartial the BBC will be. But that's got worse in recent years, for all the reasons that we've been discussing.

I see the imposition of these political appointees at the BBC and the erosion of the BBC's editorial culture as meaning that it's even less able to facilitate those

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debates. And that's partly because of pressure from the right-wing media; it's partly because of the political context in terms of its funding model and its charter and the rest of it; and it's partly because these symbiotic relationships develop between the journalists and the political establishment, of which the Conservatives are a big part.

In terms of how the left handles that, I agree that the left needs to be open-minded and willing to debate different perspectives. But, equally, I don't think we should beat ourselves up too much, because the effort to split the left, to create fractures and sow division - that was a conscious political strategy. And the reason they stuck with Brexit and antisemitism when Corbyn was leader was that they saw that these fractures had developed, and then they just pushed and pushed and pushed. And the reason they did it was that Corbynism was seen as a threat to the establishment. And those were the issues that worked. If they had found something else that split the left, they would have pursued that. Again, I'm not quite sure if that's a culture war issue, but it obviously relates to the issue of an incapacity for rational debate of UK public media.

And the antisemitism issue is a really good example of this because what many people were trying to say during the antisemitism crisis, was 'let's take the issue seriously, and let's look at the empirical data that's available to try and put in context what's actually happening'. But if you went around saying that during that period, you would be hounded out of public life. And I think that's because, again, there was no available space for the other side of the argument - you weren't allowed to enter into the debate if you hadn't accepted the terms that the establishment and the media had set. So you would be asked, 'do you accept that antisemitism is a problem in the Labour Party?' And the answer to that was obviously yes. But you could not then argue that this was not a problem that was particular to the Labour Party - and *that* was what you had to accept in order to enter into the debate.

Debs: Can we come back to the question of a left response to the BBC, including looking the kinds of things that the Media Reform Coalition has been advocating - such as a devolved and democratised 'People's BBC'. Because I really see us as being caught in a bind around the BBC as an institution: it is so consistently indefensible and yet we would be worse off if the right is able to destroy it in the way that they want to. The conversation about the BBC is very polarised between a liberal defence or right-wing criticism. As you've both said, the spectrum of legitimate opinion on

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the future of the BBC spans from *Guardian* columnists, minus Owen Jones, to *Daily Telegraph* leaders. So how do we even have a conversation about the future of this institution when that is the only space of legitimate debate within which the BBC will even allow itself to be talked about? It seems as if the only alternative position to Polly Toynbee saying that the BBC continues to uphold the highest standards of journalistic impartiality is someone at the *Times* saying that we need more Netflix and no public media at all.

My hope is that creating more democratic structures for the BBC, including devolving it, at least would give people a frame of reference - it would be a way of reframing the conversation that we're trying to have, into a conversation about how we can create a public media institution which, as we have been saying, is capable of hosting a debate which encompasses a far wider range of perspectives and opinions, and is able to support people to do the work of critically assessing those opinions, including through the use of evidence to back up positions, or to decide whether or not a given position is something which has a basis in some kind of shared reality or is some kind of fantasy. But I don't know how much space there ever will be to make that case.

Tom: That's really eloquently put, but this is precisely the dilemma the left always has - how do we put out this alternative perspective, one which doesn't fit within those elite frameworks, in a communicative system that's so weighted against us? But you are right that proposals to democratise the BBC would disarm the Conservative critique of the BBC - which, as you mentioned earlier, has some truth in it - as being concentrated in the metropolitan areas, and as being attractive to a particular social stratum, like many of these liberal institutions. But, for me, what's distinct about the BBC, or public service broadcasting, compared to the other liberal institutions you might associate with the metropolitan upper middle classes, is that if you were aiming for a broadcaster based on similar lines of debate to those within the public institutions of science or medicine, for example, the BBC would not be it. You don't negotiate between politicians to try and establish the facts of the matter - that's a very bad way of handling public debate. Which is why it's so important that, in combination with the idea of democratisation, we have an insistence on the total independence of public broadcasting from the power structure.

And this, for me, is one of the fundamental problems - you see it again and

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again in content analyses of the BBC's output. What are the sources that drive their political reporting? They are not the institutions which we would associate with useful centres of social expertise - instead, they are newspaper columnists, and Westminster politicians ...

Debs: ... who are also the least trusted people in the country! Justin, do you want to say something on this?

Justin: I do have quite a strong view about how we frame a radical solution to public service media in political terms. But first I want to discuss another aspect of the left response to culture wars. If you take the example of the assault on, and delegitimation of, the trans rights movement, or the whole antisemitism debate - which we can very clearly trace to the right-wing press - the left has to be a little bit reflexive about how it responds to these provocations. It seems to me that yet another trap that the left sometimes falls into is that these assaults on radical and progressive values that start with the right then become internalised, and start to fuel culture wars within the left. And this also applies to the whole question of disinformation about the war in Ukraine - this is something that happens time and time again. The radical alternative position ends up mirroring the forces of intolerance and delegitimation and repression that are being initiated from the right or the centre.

So, for example, instead of the left responding to the antisemitism problem in what I would consider rational terms - which is to say, clearly, antisemitism exists and it must be confronted, and, equally clearly, it's being exploited and manipulated and weaponised for political ends - it triggered a much more reactionary response amongst some parts of the left: for example in the complete intolerance of the idea, and refusal to even acknowledge as a possibility the notion that Zionism could be anything other than an extremist racist settler-colonial ideology.

Now, I happen to believe that the current mainstream invocation of Zionism as set of political ideas does map closely onto an extremist, racist settler-colonial ideology. But that doesn't mean that you cannot be a Zionist - or you cannot, indeed, as Corbyn did, believe in the possibility of an Israeli state based on a just solution to the conflict - without being a racist or an apologist for racism. And that kind of fundamentally intolerant positioning fuels the attacks from the other side. And what

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happens is - just as happened in the Covid debate to rational arguments against lockdown, or criticisms of Pfizer, or the origins debate - those ideas become lumped in with the more extremist arguments.

So I think what this speaks to in terms of culture wars is the need to depolarise, and to say, look, we disagree with these views but we are willing to share a platform with these people, we are willing to engage with them, we are willing to acknowledge their right to express those views, and we are going to resist the assaults on that basic freedom of expression that are predominantly coming from the centre and the right.

In this discussion I've been using the terms left, right and centre, even though I've been critical of them, because they're almost unavoidable when we're talking about this kind of stuff. But I do think that they are problematic, particularly with regard to how we articulate a radical or progressive idea of what public service media should be, for a number of reasons. One of these is that the culture wars themselves, and the associated issues that we've been talking about - Covid, Brexit, trans rights, etc - have cut across traditional political boundaries in a way that has really muddied that picture. But in some ways that's the least important problem. The more important problem is the way in which capitalism has historically co-opted many ideologies, which is very much the case in in the contemporary context, most obviously with regard to liberalism. But this also applies to conservatism, and, increasingly now, even to socialism. In fact, what we're seeing now is a kind of last front. Capitalism started by co-opting the values of conservatism, then it co-opted the values of liberalism; now it's trying to co-opt the values of socialism.

The consequence is a distraction from the reality that the only real struggle that underlies debates about the future of public service media, or other similar issues, is the one between the power structure and the subjects of that power structure.

If you think about the traditional radical critique of media power, it was always founded on this idea of consensus, that what elite power seeks to do is manufacture the consensus, using institutions like the BBC and other media; and that is not a natural, organic, consensus, but very much an imposed one, that fits with the ideological worldview of the owners of capital and the ruling class - that's the classic Marxist critique. But we now live in a world where *dissensus* is the most valuable defence of hegemonic power. What's happened with the explosion of digital forms of communication and social media is that the basic ideas about truth that were

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underpinning the liberal consensus have been exposed - or are subject to increasing exposure. From the perspective of hegemonic power, the best alternative to a relatively cohesive manufactured consensus is complete dissensus - because the alternative is an organic consensus, which could actually be the engine of real and lasting social change.

And if you take that notion of dissensus as your starting point, you have to find a way to articulate an idea of a truly independent BBC that speaks to public service values, and is going to engage not just people of the left, but also people of the right, including people on the right who have legitimate concerns and critiques - not of the BBC having a general left bias, which we know is nonsense, but genuine and legitimate concerns - as for example, with the whole sovereignty dimension of the Brexit debate.

So I think that framing this as a left vision of what the BBC should be is a bit of a non-starter, because you would be immediately dismissed and ignored, whereas framing it in terms of finding a way of reasserting, reconstituting and reimagining public service values, and ideals like independence, democratic accountability and all the rest of it, is a much better way of doing it. From everything that I've seen, what the MRC has written on this makes complete sense to me, but I feel that there is a more effective way of framing it - and a more effective way of thinking about how we get this message out there. How do we overcome the obvious block that lies in front of us in terms of getting any sort of pick up, even in the liberal media? How do we engage audiences from across the political spectrum?

Debs: Actually, I gave a talk in 2012 about how media reform needed to not get pigeonholed as a left-wing issue. I guess we've all been thinking about these issues for a long time ...

Debs Grayson is co-ordinator for *The BBC and Beyond* campaign and a member of the *Soundings* editorial collective.

Tom Mills is a lecturer at Aston University and chair of the Media Reform Coalition. He is author of *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service* (Verso, 2016).

Justin Schlosberg is a senior lecturer at Birkbeck, former MRC chair, and co-founder of Truth Defence: <https://truthdefence.org/>.