

An analysis of the groupthink critique: Case study of the BBC's report *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel*

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The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the world's largest broadcasting entity (BBC, 2008), found itself in crisis in 2007. From its inception, the BBC made impartiality company policy (Bridcut, 2007). The release of the report *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel* represents the BBC's response to accusation of a liberal bias and falling prey to groupthink in its decision making process. Libby Purves, a *Times* media critic, says of the report, "It's been a long time coming, but worth it. I mean the report on BBC bias, unveiled by Richard Tait, a corporation trustee and former ITN editor-in chief. Mr Tait makes general points about a 'groupthink' culture and too easy assumption of 'right' liberal values" (2007, June 19). John Bridcut, an independent programme-maker, wrote the report for the steering group and based his descriptions and conclusions on audience research; interviews with commissioners, broadcasters and programme-makers, commentators and other interested parties; and a one-day seminar in 2006.

A chorus of journalists echoes Purves' sentiments. Richard Littlejohn writing for the *Daily Mail (London)*, describes the enormous impact of the purported groupthink, "The BBC groupthink permeates its entire output, from its news bulletins, through drama and even the website" (2007, August 21). Gerard Baker, in *The Times (London)*, suggests that the BBC's problems are so pervasive that the nation lost awareness of the bias exhibited by the BBC: "You really have to leave the country to appreciate fully how pernicious the BBC's grasp of the nation's cultural and political soul has become. The groupthink and assumptions implicit in almost everything broadcast by BBC News, and even less explicitly by much else of the corporation's output, lie like a suffocating blanket over the national consciousness" (2007, March 16).

And not surprisingly, analysts point to personnel as the source of the groupthink phenomenon. Owen Gibson, media correspondent for *The Guardian (London)* reports, "A BBC Trust review of impartiality earlier this year highlighted the dangers of 'groupthink' and 'institutional bias'. Sir Michael said it was important to draw BBC staff from a wider base so that it properly reflected 'the widest possible spread of views' (2007, November 2).

Regardless of societal effect or cause of the crisis situation, at the core of concerns lies the ethics of the BBC. Writing for the *Daily Mail (London)*, Melanie Phillips explains, "Indeed, questions about the integrity of the BBC's processes are intimately bound up with questions about the integrity of its journalism. In recent months, concern has steadily mounted that our public service broadcaster is abusing its position by systematically presenting events through a distorting ideological prism. Over a vast range of issues big business, Conservatism, family

values, America, Europe, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, climate change, abortion, multiculturalism the BBC fails to be dispassionate, objective or truthful. Both present and former BBC names have spoken about the Left-wing groupthink that saturates its coverage” (Phillips, 2007, July 16). Underscoring the moral dimension, former journalist turned author, Robin Aitkin, provides numerous examples of BBC bias in his book *Can We Trust the BBC?* Aitkin concludes that the BBC hubris is “based not on observation and deduction but on faith and doctrine” (2007).

In June, 2007, the BBC responds to its critics, publishing the report *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel* that includes twelve guidelines designed to address what its critics have called a “tendency to liberal ‘groupthink’” (Gibson, 2007, June 19). At the BBC, senior advisers admit that the corporation could suffer from “groupthink,” which they describe as a tendency toward a liberal worldview and that leads to certain opinions being under-represented. This paper presents analysis of the BBC’s *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel* utilizing the groupthink thesis developed by Irving Janis. A comparison of the BBC report and groupthink principles reveals evidence to support both the critique of a liberal bias on the part of the BBC and the appropriateness of the twelve guidelines as correctives to groupthink.

The Report: *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel*

The BBC’s primary objective in producing *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel* appears to be the restoration of their own good name. The BBC press release for the report (BBC, 2007, June 18), begins, “The BBC has today published a new report on safeguarding its impartiality in the 21st century, together with extensive research on audience expectations and perceptions of impartiality.” The report detailed the attitudes and behaviors present in the BBC’s corporate culture—and twelve guidelines to lessen the risk of bias possibly resulting from groupthink.

Twelve Guidelines

The guidelines offer a path to impartiality for the BBC. The report notes that the twelve principles, “complement, rather than replace, impartiality sections in the Editorial Guidelines” (2007, p. 6). Any one of these guidelines should justify impartiality on the part of BBC employees independent of the other guidelines. The guidelines offer BBC employees reasons to uphold impartiality. In brief form, the guidelines deal with: impartiality as a source of pride, obligation to audience, political controversy, omission, program quality, genre, reflecting consensus for the common good, the difficulty of impartiality, the importance of challenging one’s assumptions, institutional values, the necessity of honesty and transparency, and the requirement that everyone involved in production must strive for impartiality.

Groupthink

Irving L. Janis, pioneer in the study of social dynamics, coined the term “groupthink” and proposed the hypothesis after investigating the problems that conformity pressure brought to major American political and military decisions. Groupthink, Janis (1982) writes, is “a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to

realistically appraise alternative courses of action” (p.9). He supports the groupthink hypothesis by analysis of the occurrence or non-occurrence of antecedent conditions, groupthink symptoms, and decision-making defects. Janis provides a prescriptive proposal for preventing the occurrence of groupthink.

The groupthink phenomenon has been applied to a wide variety of situation. Janis provides cases for examining groupthink. For instance, Janis (1972, 1977) cites the escalation of the Vietnam War and the 1961 American invasion of Cuba (the Bay of Pigs). In his 1982 volume, Janis adds an analysis of the Watergate cover-up decision. In later works, Janis cites the groupthink phenomenon in an analysis of NASA’s Challenger disaster in 1986.

Contemporary groupthink research includes business communication contexts. Burge (2008) discusses the hazards of groupthink for managers in industrial engineering. Schulz-Hardt, Frey, Luthgens, and Moscovici (2000) examined the effects of groupthink on decision making and confirmed Janis’ prediction of a relationship. Ahlfinger and Esser (2000) test the groupthink hypothesis in leadership, finding some support, noting difficulties in measurement apparently endemic to attempts to measure groupthink in real settings, and conclude that their findings support earlier research on promotional leadership and groupthink. Fuller and Aldag (1998) and Esser (1998) offer intensive reviews of groupthink research. (For an in-depth application of the groupthink thesis see also: Ferraris & Carveth, 2003).

Method

This analysis proposes to (1) apply groupthink principles to determine the validity of the public charges against the BBC, and (2) compare the BBC’s 12 guidelines with Janis’ prescriptive plan for preventing groupthink so that the potential efficacy of the guidelines may be determined. To meet these goals requires a more detailed examination of groupthink and the application of groupthink concepts. This project does not require every detail or aspect of the elaboration of the theory. An explanation of relevant aspects of groupthink and methods for preventing groupthink should provide sufficient information for comprehension of the analysis.

Analysis

Groupthink symptoms and decision-making defects are explained, accompanied by examples illustrating the principle in question. As the BBC report focuses on recommendations for avoiding partiality in broadcasting and spends very little time discussing the nature of the charges or admitting that the BBC is guilty of significant wrong-doing, much of the evidence to support or deny the charges is anecdotal and second-hand in nature. While relying on this type of information may be seen as risky, the introduction of viewpoints outside the BBC may, in fact, be the only means available of assessing BBC actions. The simple fact that the BBC issued this report on impartiality belies BBC assertions and anecdotal evidence of a culture of impartiality. Following, Janis’ prescriptive recommendations are compared to the twelve guidelines offered by the BBC report.

Groupthink symptoms

Janis (1982) identified three broad categories (types) of groupthink symptoms with eight specific symptoms. Type I involves overestimation of the group, its power, and morality. This includes the illusion of vulnerability and an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality. The report itself echoes the charges of the critics, noting the BBC's sense of superiority and leadership: "The BBC has a long and honourable tradition of international broadcasting in English and many other languages. Its editorial values, accuracy and impartiality command respect around the world" (p.25). This claim flies in the face of BBC detractors' claims of liberal groupthink bias clouding the impartiality of the BBC.

Janis' Type II groupthink symptom is closed-mindedness, exhibited by collective efforts to rationalize with the purpose of discounting information that might lead to reconsideration of assumptions and stereotyping the views of enemy leaders as evil or stupid. Here the report focuses on incidents far in the past without addressing contemporary concerns, offering a few examples: "In 1938, the agreement with Hitler signed in Munich by Neville Chamberlain was hailed as a triumph: there was virtually no coverage given in newsreels, the press or radio broadcasts to the dismay felt in some political quarters. Similarly, in 1953, the BBC and the press said not a word about the serious stroke that had incapacitated the prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill" (p. 27). However, by demonstrating a long-standing pattern of behavior, the report validates claims of BBC manipulation of the news to support a particular political agenda. Further documentation of closed-mindedness appears in the report, but indirectly. In an effort to urge BBC managers to rally the workers, Bridcut obliquely grants the charges of failing to reconsider options. The report states that, "We need editors in every genre to take their role as gatekeepers seriously and challenge their own and their teams' assumptions. We need to get them out of the straitjacket and strive for distinctive rather than derivative BBC journalism and other programmes" (p. 69). The implication is that editors do not challenge assumptions, have their staffs in straitjackets, and strive for mediocrity in broadcasting.

Pressures toward uniformity comprise Type III in Janis' symptoms of groupthink. These pressures include self-censorship of deviation from apparent group consensus, shared illusions of unanimity, direct pressure on any group member who expresses arguments dissenting from the group line, and the emergence of self-appointed mindguards who protect the group from influences that might undercut forced group cohesion. Here, the BBC report offers no analysis, either acknowledging the criticism or denying it. The media analysis presented earlier in this essay confirms that the BBC broadcasts partisan, even dogmatic, information. Bridcut offers tacit acknowledgement of a corporate culture of uniformity when he writes of straitjackets and derivative broadcasting. The impartiality report describes an irony of reform—replacing one cause of a problem with another. Bridcut explains how efforts to remain on the cutting edge and break free of the restraints of conformity result in conformity, writing, "The BBC and its rivals make many successful efforts to think 'outside the box'. Channel 4, after all, was set up to experiment with the form and content of programmes, and its refreshing alternative approach has spread to other channels. But a pattern of simple iconoclasm, mixed with revisionist history for the sake of it, has sometimes resulted in a new conformity" (p. 37). Although he never says it, Bridcut alludes to pressures toward uniformity. No direct evidence clearly supports this claim, but the force of repeated reports and Bridcut unintentional acknowledgements strongly suggest conformity problems that might be uncovered in future research.

Decision-making defects

Defective decision-making resulting from groupthink is well documented. Schulz-Hardt, Frey, Luthgens, and Moscovici (2000) offer empirical support for groupthink resulting in defective decision-making. Janis outlines several types of these defects. He includes few alternatives, where the group considers only a few alternatives, often two; no re-examination of alternatives; and rejecting negative information and expert opinion. The BBC's critics concur that flawed decision-making pervades the organization. In particular, these outside observers note a liberal bias. The report does not address this issue directly. Indirectly, Bridcut acknowledges and denies this charge when he, throughout the report, presents anecdotal evidence that the BBC does not have a liberal bias.

As noted earlier, the BBC report itself stands as a rejection of negative information. By never directly acknowledging the allegations or accepting any responsibility for negative outcomes, Bridcut demonstrates either total ignorance of the controversy or willful rejection of the opposing information.

Preventing groupthink

Janis provides procedures that can be employed to minimize the possibility of groupthink

1. Assign a member to be *devil's advocate* to allow disagreement and criticism of the leader.
2. Leaders should not reveal their preferences to the group at the beginning of the discussion.
3. Different groups with different leaders should work separately on common problems for varied perspectives.
4. Group members should discuss the group's processes with close friends, reporting reactions to the group.
5. Often used outside expert should be encouraged to disagree with the group's assumptions.
6. Time should be spent discussing all warning signals from rivals and hypothesizing alternative scenarios of the rivals' intentions, when issues arise about rival groups.
7. After preliminary decisions, the group should adjourn and hold a second chance meeting at a latter date to let their ideas incubate (pp. 260-276).

The twelve principles and groupthink prevention

Comparing the twelve guiding principles in the BBC report reveals that the steering committee attempted to address an effective proposal to insure impartiality and to address journalistic bias, addressing the groupthink culture the BBC never addresses. The application of Janis' prescription to the guidelines may appear problematic given the mandatory nature of the former and the suggestions offered in the guidelines. The purpose of this analysis is not to superimpose Janis' framework on the BBC situation. Rather, we apply the means of preventing groupthink to the BBC's recommendations simply as a gauge of their possible effectiveness, if followed, in curbing the purported groupthink.

- 1) *Create a devil's advocate or critical evaluator to allow disagreement and criticism.*

This is clearly outlined in the report. For instance, “Impartiality can often be affected by the stance and experience of programme-makers, who need constantly to examine and challenge their own assumptions” (guiding principle 9). And, “Impartiality requires the BBC to examine its own institutional values, and to assess the effect they have on its audiences” (guiding principle 10).

- 2) *Leaders should not reveal their preferences to the group at the beginning of the discussion.*

This is addressed as an impartiality guideline for everyone involved. “Impartiality is required of everyone involved in output. It applies as much to the most junior researcher as it does to the Director-General. But editors and executive producers must give a strong lead to their teams. They must ensure that impartiality process begins at the conception of a programme and lasts throughout production: if left until the approval stage, it is usually too late” (guiding principle 12).

- 3) *Several groups with different leaders can work independently on common problems to offer different perspectives.*

For instance, the report suggests, “Impartiality applies across all BBC platforms and all types of programme. No genre is exempt. But the way it is applied and assessed will vary in different genre” (guiding principle 6). And, “. . . the BBC’s journalistic expertise is an invaluable resource for all departments to draw on” (guiding principle 8).

- 4) *Members should discuss the group’s processes with trusted friends and report their reactions to the group.*

Nothing in the report references this technique.

- 5) *Outside experts should be called in periodically as resource person. They should be encouraged to disagree with the group’s assumptions.*

This is probably the most significant of the procedures and is evident in multiple guiding principles in the BBC report. For instance, “Impartiality must continue to be applied to matters of party political or industrial controversy. But in today’s more diverse political, social and cultural landscape, it requires a wider and deeper application” (guiding principle 3). And, “Impartiality is no excuse for insipid programming. It allows room for fair-minded, evidence-based judgments by senior journalist and documentary-makers, and for controversial, passionate and polemical arguments by contributors and writers” (guiding principle 5).

- 6) *Whenever issues involve relations with rival groups, time should be spent discussing all warning signals and hypothesizing alternative scenarios.*

While not explicitly addressed, the report does state: “Impartiality involves breadth of view, and can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on centre ground”(guiding principle 4).

- 7) *After preliminary decisions have been reached, the group should adjourn and hold a second meeting at a latter date to let their ideas incubate.*

The report clearly agrees with this: “Impartiality is a process, about which the BBC should be honest and transparent with its audience: this should permit greater boldness in its programming decision. But impartiality can never be fully achieved in everyone’s satisfaction: the BBC should not be defensive about his but ready to acknowledge and correct significant breaches as and when they occur” (guiding principle 11).

Discussion

This analysis of the artifacts involved in the BBC's liberal groupthink scandal reveals the presence of a groupthink organizational culture present at the BBC and demonstrates that the twelve guidelines proposed in the report *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel* contain all of the elements in Janis' methods for preventing groupthink. Utilizing the groupthink thesis to analyze symptoms effectively locates the instances of groupthink-like behavior. By being able to identify symptoms and defective decision-making a group can be alerted to a potential problem or even a catastrophic event.

While both the theoretical guidelines developed to prevent groupthink, established by Irving Janis, and the twelve guiding principles developed to address impartiality outlined in the BBC report are more abstract in nature than pragmatic, the guidelines adopted by the BBC conform sufficiently to Janis' prescriptions for preventing groupthink to validate their selection. In this respect, the groupthink thesis does encourage an examination of a group's commitment to an open-minded and evaluative process.

The BBC assumed the Herculean task of assuring the public of the BBC's impartiality—that liberal bias and groupthink would no longer cloud their judgment or reporting. One particular feature of the guidelines makes success more likely: the fact that the report offers guidelines rather than rules. Rules restrict discussion, making dissent less likely. Groupthink should be less likely when fostering an atmosphere of open exchange of ideas. Richard Tait, the BBC trustee and chair of the steering group that had overseen the project describes this invisible mechanism of the guidelines, declaring that, "This project signals a new, more open approach to achieving impartiality at the BBC. It is not intended to prescribe definitive solutions or an impartiality template but aims to stimulate further discussion throughout the BBC and so bring impartiality to the forefront of the production process" (BBC, 2007, June 18).

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