

The price of public trust

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Everyone is entitled to have opinions. And to express them. But when, where, and how?

Time was when it was unthinkable that a newsreader, or a reporter, should abuse their standing as a dispassionate communicator of reliable information to convince us that we should buy a product or service. By definition, that is the job of a salesperson, whose specialist knowledge or skill can assist us to make choices between the goods we see advertised. These persuasive efforts are quite distinct from the function of the purveyors of news and 'current affairs'.

Should the rules of the game be different in this age of ubiquity, where just appearing on TV can turn you into a celebrity?

However sceptical 'information overload' may have made us, most of us would prefer to think that the people who are employed, in effect, to be our ears, eyes and voices, will perform their task without fear or favour. What they tell us can help us to make up our minds about how to vote, how to interpret the actions of those who govern us, indeed how to make many life choices. We expect them to be free of vested interests; we rely upon their professional judgements; their personal opinions belong at private dinner parties and the ballot box. Criticism is justified when they allow their personal views to obtrude, tarnishing the impartiality required of broadcasters under statute.

No such regulations apply to newspapers, of course, except in the case of financial correspondents. We may feel more comfortable with the reports of a financial journalist who doesn't play the market than with those of one who does – and even then, if we have been alerted to their interest, we can at least proceed with due caution. But how are we to interpret the supposed impartiality of broadcast reporters and presenters who sell their personal opinions to a rival outlet?

Preserving integrity

It is easy to dress up as a freedom of expression issue the BBC's 'disappearance' of Robert Kilroy-Silk, and the corporation's re-imposition of constraints upon its journalists to prevent them authoring opinion pieces in newspapers. But at the heart of the matter is the importance of preserving the integrity of the premier public service broadcaster.

The authority of the BBC has taken some knocks following the editorial errors that exercised Lord Hutton – made all the more unfortunate by their coincidence with the opening of public debate about charter renewal. But the most damning charge it could face at any time would be that its moderators of current affairs had compromised themselves by publicly expressing strong personal views or political bias.

Kilroy-Silk's often poisonous slurs on ethnic minority groups in his *Sunday Express* columns should have been a cause for concern at the BBC long ago. Even with falling sales (down by

six per cent in a year to 866,310 in January 2004), the *Sunday Express* has an audience at least the equivalent of both Radio 4's flagship *Today* programme and *Kilroy* itself.

He may be an 'independent' producer, but he was supplying the BBC with a daily current affairs 'debate'. However obsequious a host, the baggage of his own prejudices remains in tow.

There is a special irony here, because he has had double protection to express his opinions. As a columnist, he is able to sidestep the Press Complaints Commission, which rarely deals with 'comment' unless there is evidence of factual inaccuracy. And besides, generalised slurs are not caught by Clause 13 of the publishing industry's code of practice, which deals with discrimination. Only named individuals are protected from prejudicial coverage. Providing columnists do not breach public order legislation by directly inciting hatred or violence, they can get away with remarks as heinous as Julius Streicher's tirades against Jews, Gypsies and Catholics during the Third Reich.

A price to be paid

However, just as it is unacceptable for an MP, whose job is to represent everyone's interests, to propagate racist 'jokes', so it should be unacceptable for those employed to inform the public to promote their own private views as a means of boosting their income based on their 'celebrity'. If you want to earn a living and public trust as a presenter of news and current affairs, there is a price to be paid – not the loss of your personal opinions, but care about how and when and where they are expressed.

Press freedom is, after all, a responsibility exercised by journalists on behalf of the public. That is why the compact of trust that should exist between the public and journalists is so important. The platform from which you survey the world and its issues and tell people what is happening should not be used to promote a partial view.