Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Knives out for the BBC as UK's most trusted news source faces Trump's ire

The UK's disputatious political opinion formers finally have a judgement they can agree on: the BBC is in a mess. And that was before Donald Trump turned a local drama into a full-blown crisis by threatening to sue the national broadcaster for $1 billion.

The other thing everyone is agreed on is that, in the specific matter that has belatedly incensed the US president, Britain's most trusted news source got it wrong.

Two top executives have already resigned after it was revealed a BBC documentary spliced separate parts of a Trump speech in a way that suggested he explicitly encouraged the Capitol Hill riot of January 2021.

Weaponising the BBC

The editorial lapse, if that is all it was, has reignited a wider debate on alleged systemic bias at the BBC that favours a left-wing 'woke' agenda, a charge vigorously dismissed by Deborah Turness, its departing head of news.

The affair has also revived long-standing concerns about political interference and alleged mismanagement at the BBC that leaves it facing potentially the most existential threat in its century-old history.

It has also exposed the perils facing established independent and public service media worldwide in an era of misinformation, manufactured culture wars and 'alternative' facts.

> "Our organisation is a critical ingredient of a healthy society… We should champion it, not weaponise it" - Tim Davie

In a resignation statement at the weekend, director-general Tim Davie acknowledged the BBC had made some mistakes in what he described as febrile and increasingly polarised times.

But he also stressed that: "Our organisation is a critical ingredient of a healthy society… We should champion it, not weaponise it."

Noble sentiments, no doubt. The problem is that the debate about the BBC and its future course have already been weaponised. While right-wing commentators have been revelling in the broadcaster's latest travails, its defenders have accused its enemies of mounting a politically motivated coup to intimidate and diminish the BBC.

Just another participant in a 'diverse media landscape'

The crisis comes as the government prepares to review the unresolved issue of how the broadcaster is to be funded from 2027, when its current charter comes up for its next 10-year renewal.

The Labour government's culture secretary, Lisa Nandy, acknowledged earlier this year that the annual BBC licence fee, which effectively serves as a tax on every household with a TV, was unenforceable.

> Reduced funding, perhaps more than the present battle over alleged bias, presents the greater challenge for the BBC

However, neither ministers nor the broadcaster have yet decided how to replace a diminishing income stream that represents two-thirds of its funding at a time when more householders are opting to withhold the fee.

Reduced funding, perhaps more than the present battle over alleged bias, presents the greater challenge for the BBC, threatening to reduce its status to just another participant in what is politely termed a diverse media landscape.

An error in judgement

In reality, it is a diversity that hides a multitude of sins. In a landscape in which misinformation and conspiracy increasingly crowd out what used to be called straight news, is there even room for institutions such as the BBC?

And, in the short term, how is the broadcaster defending itself against the characteristically hyperbolic Trumpian charge that the BBC is a purveyor of 100 per cent fake news?

The BBC's government-appointed chair, Samir Shah, has apologised for an "error in judgement" over the editing of the 2021 Trump speech. However, in a letter to a parliamentary committee, he rejected the charge that BBC bosses had sought to "bury" a range of issues and stories that has fuelled the current controversy.

> The Prescott document has largely been taken at face value by the BBC's critics, including The Telegraph itself

He was referring to a leaked memorandum by Michael Prescott, a former BBC external adviser on editorial standards, which sparked the current furore when it was published by the Telegraph newspaper.

Prescott exposed not only the issue of the Trump documentary but also suggested the BBC management had failed to tackle bias on a list of other issues, ranging from racial diversity to gender identity to an alleged anti-Israeli stance on the Gaza war, in particular citing coverage by the BBC's Arabic service.

The Prescott document has largely been taken at face value by the BBC's critics, including The Telegraph itself. Shah insisted, however, that the issues it raised were precisely those that had been considered by the BBC's board and its editorial guidelines and standards committee.

A vital role in an age of disinformation

The board is numerically dominated by its non-executive majority of government appointees, and the BBC's present defenders claim it is under the sway of members who seek to limit the independence of the broadcaster.

The BBC has a vital role in an age of disinformation - Keir Starmer

Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey was among those who accused the former prime minister, Boris Johnson, of having appointed "Conservative cronies" to the board.

He specifically called on the present government to remove Johnson appointee Robbie Gibb from the board, arguing that the former Conservative communications aide had a record of attempting to interfere in editorial decisions.

The left-of-centre Guardian went further this week, quoting unnamed insiders to claim that Gibb had "led the charge" in pressuring the BBC leadership over claims of systemic bias in coverage of Trump, Gaza and transgender rights.

With the BBC crisis threatening to spill over even more into domestic and even transatlantic politics, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has so far backed the corporation, with his office rejecting Trump's charge that it is corrupt.

"The BBC has a vital role in an age of disinformation, where there's a clear argument for a robust, impartial British news service to deliver," his spokesman said. "That case is stronger than ever."