

Emily Maitlis' Speech

For reeding

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/we-have-to-stop-normalising-the-absurd>

(10 min after video start)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0dRBtSAvLM&feature=youtu.be>

Emily Maitlis in Edinburgh 29. August 2022

A warning call: The BBC is failing as a spotter in the age of populism

by [Annette Dittert](#)



Emily Maitlis während ihrer Rede in Edinburgh Screenshot: *Edinburgh TV Festival*

It was more than just a speech, it was a liberation, a cathartic moment, not just for Emily Maitlis herself, but for all the Brits who have long recognized the British Tory government's acute threat to the BBC as part of the attacks on their perceive democracy. Because since Boris Johnson took power in 2019 and transformed the old conservative party into a right-wing populist party, the political pressure on the BBC has increased to such an extent that more and more of its best reporters and presenters are giving up.

Emily Maitlis, once the star of Newsnight magazine, is one of them. She had left the station in February and now the public learned why. At the Edinburgh TV Festival, where every year the most important movers and shakers in electronic media come together, she didn't mince words. Because that, she accused her former employer of doing, was what she and many others had expected for too long.

Your allegations are varied and hit the BBC in the heart. The much-vaunted "impartiality" has degenerated into a weapon against the truth. Even during the Brexit referendum, their producers would have found 60 economists in five minutes who warned of the possible consequences of an EU exit, but it would have taken many hours to find even one voice that thought Brexit was a sensible project. "Nevertheless, in the end we presented both in parallel, as two sides of the same coin, as equal approaches. But that was not the case."

Now the concept of false balance is not new in itself: the fact that during the Brexit referendum the BBC regularly granted oversized broadcasting times not only to abstruse economists but also to ultra-right-wing agitators such as Nigel Farage, thereby legitimizing them in the first place and thus making the Brexit vote at least more likely, no one can seriously deny it.

Lack of political independence

So far, however, everyone who left the sender had remained staunchly silent. Maitlis was the first to say so publicly. The waves around her speech have been beating high for days now. Because in her text she went one step further, she directly named the reason for the long-established chilling effect, a self-restraint in the BBC's reporting: the strong independence of the broadcaster, which - increasingly threatened by its own government - its Der journalistic compass and thus the obligation to the factual truth lost in the age of populism.

For years, reports from the BBC have rarely revealed what problems Brexit is causing, for example, for the precise economy. The reason: Because what shouldn't be can't be. In early 2020, the Johnson government declared that it had dealt with Brexit and that it no longer wished to speak about it with immediate effect. Shortly thereafter, a corresponding instruction was even written to the government officials. Since then, the calls for help from the increasingly desperate small and medium-sized businesses have gone unheeded.

BBC journalists continue to follow this announcement to this day. In the evening news, for example, you can see lengthy reports about the lack of doctors and nurses; However, the fact that this deficiency is also essentially related to Brexit and the loss of tens of thousands of EU citizens who predicted these jobs is not explained.

Accomplices in a conspiracy against the public

Maitlis, whose word weighs even more heavily for having experienced what is happening to the BBC from the inside for so long, explained it this way:

"Many on the network are afraid to even address the blatant economic damage caused by this biggest political realignment of any country in 2016, for fear of being branded pessimists, anti-populists or, worse, 'unpatriotic.' But every day we give in to that pressure feels like one where we become complicit in a conspiracy against our viewers, the British people. And why would they bother us when they see that we are so reluctant to tell them clearly what is really happening?"

The long-standing loss of credibility has already led to the fact that the British, who have traditionally defended the public service system, are increasingly turning away from it in disappointment. That means the BBC is losing support right now where it could always safely count on it before. But what can happen when a BBC journalist tries to resist this pressure is

something Emily Maitlis has experienced first-hand. She addressed the most spectacular case in speech.

Warning without procedure

When Boris Johnson's powerful chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, broke the rules in the middle of the first strict lockdown and drove privately across half of England in May 2020, the public outcry reached the front pages of the right-wing tabloids. Johnson, however, let him get away with it. He couldn't even bring himself to issue a warning. Maitlis then opened her "Newsnight" show that evening: "Dominic Cummings broke the rules. The country can see that and is shocked that the government doesn't seem to be able to."

In the end, she was warned. For exactly these sentences. The amazing thing about it: Downing Street hardly had to do anything for it. It was the BBC itself that publicly apologized for this moderation the very next morning. This passage did not correspond to the principle of impartiality to which one was committed. Not the "entire country" was outraged.

Maitlis and the editors themselves were not informed beforehand, an extremely unusual process by BBC standards, since there is a procedure for such complaints that stipulates that the person concerned must first speak to them personally. Knowing how strictly internal rules are normally followed, Maitlis explained in Edinburgh that it made no sense, unless management was under so much pressure that they wanted to reassure the government without any delay.

Attacks and Cuts

Given the Johnson administration's constant attacks and threats against the BBC, such a swift defensive move is not surprising. Because since 2019 there has hardly been a week without a minister attacking the station. Massive cuts have already led to the entire station having to be shut down. From 2027, the Tories want to completely abolish the BBC as a public service system. Little is likely to change in the post-Johnson era either: his likely successor, Liz Truss, who belongs to the far right wing of the party, is already accusing the BBC of falsifying the facts and spreading "fake news".

All of this is particularly threatening for the BBC because, unlike the German public service system, for example, the broadcaster reports more or less directly to the government in Britain. An irony of history, if you will, since the British, together with the Americans, had decreed us Germans the public service system as a federal one after the Second World War in order to ensure that politicians had central access to a national broadcasting system should no longer be possible. At home, however, such considerations were not considered necessary at the time.

Unlike in Germany, the government is still negotiating directly with the BBC about their fees and can cut them down at will if they want to. In addition, there is only one central supervisory body, the so-called "Board", whose chairman is appointed directly by the government, more precisely the Ministry of Culture.

In 2021, Boris Johnson made sure that his party colleague Richard Sharp got this post, who, in addition to sharp criticism of the BBC, had distinguished himself above all by having donated the equivalent of half a million euros to the Tory party in previous years. Almost half of the remaining members of the Board of Directors are filled directly by the Ministry of

Culture. This Board then also appoints the director of the BBC. It is no coincidence that Tim Davie, a member of the conservative party, has been at the helm here since 2020.

Political agents on the BBC board

The fact that the BBC remained largely politically independent in the past despite these structures was mainly due to the fact that the official governments prior to Johnson more or less respected the desired distance between politicians and broadcasters. But just as Johnson generally ignored the unwritten British constitution and undermined the cornerstones of democracy elsewhere, the Tories have been using the structure that offers them opportunities to influence them since his election victory in 2019.

Here, too, Emily Maitlis spoke plainly, speaking frankly of the "political agents" on the BBC's board, and one man in particular: Robbie Gibb. The former advisor to Theresa May, who was also involved in setting up the ultra-right broadcaster GB News, had repeatedly publicly threatened government-critical BBC journalists with sanctions.

Maitlis demands how can a man sit on the BBC's board of directors as the chief guardian of the impartiality of its journalists. A man who, as the Financial Times recently reported, was outright in his bid to thwart what he felt was left-wing appointments, arguing that it was damaging to the BBC's good relations with government. Listeners to the speech in Edinburgh said afterwards that Maitlis was "brave" to call him so openly, and that alone shows how much has slipped in the so-called motherland of democracy.

Normalization of the case

But what makes Emily Maitli's speech so worth hearing or reading, beyond all these concrete points, is the actual core question of her lecture: How does public journalism, whose primary task should always be to monitor the executive, have to deal with a government which is a danger not only to himself, but more generally to the democratic institutions of their country? In such a situation, the very definition of "impartiality" can no longer be left to the government as a matter of principle. And how does public-law journalism report on the increasing decay of democratic structures, which it is supposed to defend? By reporting on it like the weather, and thereby normalizing the development?

No, says Emily Maitlis, and at the end of her presentation she takes up the metaphor of the frog in the water, which is getting hotter every day. It's time for the frog to jump out of the water, call all his friends and warn that they will die in the boiling water very soon.

This is exactly what Maitlis tried to do with her lecture. And at best, it triggers exactly that, once the BBC journalists talk to each other, they realize the seriousness of the situation, and the island finally starts a discussion about how to help the BBC, that grand old lighthouse of the public law systems can guarantee genuine independence even in times of populism.