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Representing the Nation: a comparative study of the social constitution of senior BBC journalists, cabinet-level politicians and the British public

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Abstract

This study assesses the social constitution of senior BBC journalists and British politicians and considers the extent to which they reflect the general public. By examining ten variables - including gender, age, ethnicity, parental occupation and education - this paper shows the majority of the BBC and Conservative cohorts spent their formative years in the more prosperous regions of the UK and have family backgrounds that suggest relative wealth. Many also attended private secondary schools, and just under half studied at the elite British universities, Oxford and Cambridge. The senior Labour politicians, however, are a closer match to the national population in gender and regional influences. They also have relatively modest backgrounds, and few attended elite universities. This paper raises the question of whether middle class, metropolitan journalists, who have spent most of their lives in southern England, can identify with – and report on - issues that affect the greater British population.

Keywords

BBC; class; diversity; journalists; political communication; politics; representation

Despite competition from digital and social media, the BBC remains the UK's first choice for news in general and political news in particular (Ofcom 2017; Yaxley 2017.) Reporting politics is a core function of BBC News: former Director General Mark Thompson said the Corporation's is "unflinching in holding power to account" (BBC 2011), and former BBC political editor Nick Robinson wrote: "My job is report on what those in power are thinking and doing" (2012.) But the BBC's obligations go far beyond these noble principles. As an organisation founded on public service and funded by a mandatory licence fee, it has a duty that is unmatched elsewhere in the British media. Indeed, its 2017 Annual Report reaffirmed the importance of "serving and representing the whole of the UK" (BBC 2017, 2.)

In this context, the word "represent" has two interrelated meanings. First, as an employer the BBC is required to reflect the demographic constitution of the UK (gender, ethnicity, etc.) in its workforce. Second, BBC editors and journalists have a professional duty to represent the lives, concerns and aspirations of the British public. To do this effectively, however, they must be aware of the diversity, extent and intensity of public sentiment. As highlighted by current BBC Director General Tony Hall: "our purpose is to represent everyone... (and) as a truly creative organisation, must embrace as many voices and views as possible, as well as giving opportunities to people from all backgrounds" (BBC 2016a.) It follows that if there is a mismatch between the social constitution of the British population and BBC journalists, then the latter might be unable to accurately represent the interests of the public.

People like us

Although the length limitation of this article precludes detailed analysis of the various arguments, it is important to note that relationships between the social constitution of journalists and the content they produce is contentious territory. While journalists clearly do not need to have experienced something personally (for example, being the victim of a crime, or winning an Olympic medal) to effectively report on the subject, it is arguably advantageous if practitioners collectively have similar life experiences to their audiences. Conversely, if journalists have relatively privileged backgrounds, they might struggle to appreciate the socioeconomic challenges faced by the rest of the population. Some commentators maintain

that privilege does indeed prevent empathic reporting. Michael Schudson, for example, noted a fracture between American journalists and their audiences. If journalists most easily associate with issues that “concern people like themselves”, wrote Schudson, then the profession might find it difficult to relate to deeply-seated social problems (2011, 39.) This position was mirrored in a British context by Edwards and Cromwell (2009) who argued that journalists lack genuine empathy with the public because of their privileged upbringings.

The counterargument is equally compelling. This emphasises the importance of journalistic codes (objectivity, fairness, accuracy, etc.) which, when reinforced by group socialisation and training, subordinate a journalist’s own background and experiences below professional considerations when producing news reports (McQuail 1994:145, Harrison 2000, Hetherington 1985.) As with any occupation, individuals modify their personal behaviour to some extent in order to perform their professional role and in news production, practitioners are: ‘socialised quickly into the values and routines in the daily rituals’ (Schudson 1989:273.) In the UK, the BBC is particularly noted for impressing its corporate ethos and methods of work on new editorial staff. The strength of such forces should not be underestimated: as Golding and Elliott note: ‘News changes very little even when the individuals that produce it change’ (in Curran and Seaton 2003:264.)

Debates in this sphere have been boosted in recent years by two comprehensive surveys of British journalists published by the National Council Training for Journalists (NCTJ 2012), and the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford (Thurman *et al*, 2016.) Arguably the most illuminating finding of the Reuters’ survey was the “academisation” of the profession: 86 percent of the grand sample have university degrees, as do virtually all recent recruits. Over a third of young journalists also have post-graduate degrees and many also have specialist journalism training. While it is important that reporters are skilled and knowledgeable, academisation is potentially worrying because it may: “have other, undesirable, consequences for the socioeconomic diversity of the profession” (ibid: 6-10.) Although this point was not explored further in the paper, it is true that, despite two decades of steady growth in undergraduate admissions, only around one third of teenagers from median income British families attend universities, compared with three-quarters in the upper decile (Anders 2012, 17.)

With a degree now almost prerequisite for a career in journalism, young people who do not take the university route are effectively excluded from the profession. Furthermore, those who *do* embark on an undergraduate course can expect to leave with a debt approaching £50,000 (BBC, 2016.) This puts the offspring of lower income families at a further disadvantage, which is compounded when one considers that unpaid internships, sometimes protracted, are an essential step in the career-building process (Abbott 2017; Milburn 2012, 5; NCTJ 2012, 53.) This over-representation of people from relatively high-income families in journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1950, less than four percent of Britons went to university (THES 2013) and, although the proportion steadily increased to around 15 percent in the 1990s, a degree remained the qualification of the elite. In his influential study, Jeremy Tunstall (1971) found that all seven ‘prestige’ national newspapers editors were in this select group. He also noted, however, that many journalists joined the profession straight from secondary school.

Although the NCTJ survey placed the proportion of degree-holders lower than Reuters (73 versus 86 percent), it was equally concerned by journalism becoming the preserve of the middle class. This survey revealed that only three percent of new entrants to the profession have parents in the lowest, unskilled occupations compared with 17 per cent across the British economy. Conversely, 65 percent come from managerial or professional households, compared to 29 percent of the UK population. The clear implication, said the authors, is that young people who do not have the financial support for post-graduate training and unpaid internships: “continue to be deterred from becoming journalists” (NCTJ 2012:31-2.) This data underlined the findings of an earlier NCTJ report which itself informed a wider-ranging, government-sponsored research project (Milburn 2012.) Although this study is open to methodological critique, it is still illuminating. With regards to journalism’s record, the author stated the focus has tended to be on ethnicity and gender, but not socioeconomic, diversity:

“Our sense is that current efforts are fragmented and lacking in any real vigour,” wrote Milburn. “Journalism, with some honourable exceptions, does not seem to take the issue of fair access seriously.” Indeed, at the top of the journalism hierarchy in particular, “the default setting was to recruit from far too narrow a part of the social spectrum” (ibid:2-3.)

Class distinctions

The concept of class is often used to explain the demarcations of society, but opinions are divided over definitions of strata. Even so, notable works around the millennium (Sampson 2004; Hobson 1999; Adonis and Pollard 1998) argued that, despite protestations from those convinced that meritocratic forces were eroding inherited privilege, the British class system endures, and the country is still run by a privileged elite. Over the last decade other authors have confirmed the preservation of the ‘Establishment’; a small group of powerful people who are largely detached from the rest of society (Mount 2012; Savage *et al* 2013; Jones 2015.) The defining characteristic of the elite is high wealth which means their life experiences are very different to those of other classes. For example, whereas higher income groups have access to private health care, the majority depend on the state-funded National Health Service. Arguably the greatest difference, however, is an educational system in which prosperity enables access to independent secondary schools and hence, elite universities. As graduates, children from rich families then go on to dominate the professions, business, media and politics. By this process, the class system becomes self-perpetuating and social mobility is limited.

Independent, private schools are not - despite their colloquial British name of ‘public schools’ - universally available because parents pay directly for the education. In 2017, the average fee for one child was £32,259 per year as a boarder (living during term time at the school) or £13,419 if the pupil attends during the day only (ISC, personal communication, November 9 2017.) The median annual post-tax income for an adult in the UK is £22,000 (ONS 2016) and so a typical British family with two parents on average salaries would struggle to educate just one child privately. A family would need to be firmly in the top half of the national income table to afford such expenditure and, hence, only a small minority – seven percent - of Britons have attended independent schools (Arnett 2014.)

One reason parents invest in private education is that it greatly increases chances of admission to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Undergraduate places at Oxbridge are in high demand, and successful candidates are in a very small minority: in 2015 they accounted for just 6,649 (1.25 percent) of 532,000 UK university admissions. If admissions were proportionate to the independent-state split identified above, Oxbridge would recruit seven percent of undergraduates from independent schools. The actual figures are 38 percent for Cambridge and 45 percent for Oxford (UCAS 2015; University of Cambridge 2015; University of Oxford 2015.) This suggests that privately-educated children are around six times more likely to win a place at Oxford or Cambridge than their state-schooled peers. Although independent schooling does not *guarantee* an Oxbridge education, children born into wealthy families have a distinct advantage. In recent years, these institutions have taken steps to widen access, but some argue little has changed. Quoting the universities’ own figures, British MP David Lammy wrote that Oxbridge continues to operate a form of “social apartheid”, with four-fifths of offers going to “the sons and daughters of barristers, doctors and chief executives” (Lammy, 2017.)

Elite journalists

Advantage gained during formative years inevitably spills into adulthood. The Milburn Report highlighted the extent to which elite occupations are dominated by the privately-educated: 75 percent of senior judges; 54 percent of leading British journalists; 43 percent of barristers; and 35 percent of MPs. A disproportionate number – one third in the case of the journalists – also went on to Oxbridge. Considering the data collectively, Milburn’s summation was critical: “social engineering on a grand scale” (Milburn 2012:4.) But he reserved his most pointed comments for journalism which had become “one of the most socially exclusive of professions” (ibid:54.)

Previous studies have shown that exclusivity in the upper reaches of journalism is entrenched. In 1971 Jeremy Tunstall discovered that four of the seven national newspaper editors were Oxbridge graduates. In 2006, the Sutton Trust reported that 45 percent of the top 100 newspaper editors, columnists, broadcasters and executives were Oxford or Cambridge alumni (in Edwards and Cromwell 2009: 234-235.) Later research discovered that half of the UK's leading journalists were privately educated, and 54 percent went to Oxbridge (Sutton Trust 2016.) Although Oxford and Cambridge provide exceptional education, graduates leave with more than a prestigious certificate: they also benefit throughout their adult life from social networks which include fellow graduates working in other elite occupations. Hence, an over-representation of Oxbridge alumni in higher professions, particularly those with strong social elements, suggests a perpetuation of the class system which places the agenda of the privileged above that of the majority.

In recent years, the BBC has broadened the scope of its diversity measurements to include socioeconomic indicators. In 2014, the Corporation started collecting relevant data from new employees, and training recruitment staff to overcome "unconscious bias" that might lead them to employ people with similar backgrounds as their own (Perry 2014.) The BBC also announced a change to the recruitment process by which staff could not see an applicant's name or university education. Anonymity, argued a BBC spokesperson, would help ensure decisions were based on merit not background (*Telegraph* 2016.) The most significant step toward greater inclusivity, however, occurred when the BBC launched its five-year Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

Although social class was mentioned, the emphasis remained firmly on gender, ethnicity and disability (BBC 2016a.) Similarly, the BBC's Annual Report 2016/2017 specified 'on-screen portrayal targets' for disabled people (five percent) and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (15 percent). It also stated 'all staff' targets for 2020 for women (50 percent) and LGBT (eight percent) but not for other under-represented categories (BBC 2017:60.) Indeed, the BBC published a complementary Equality Information Report that analysed selected characteristics of its workforce in great depth. Although gender, disability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation were presented as the primary measurements, the report also included socio-economic data. These were not discussed in any detail, however, nor were they compared to national figures. Even so, BBC managers seem to be aware of their importance: '...there is not a single measure that can fully capture an individual's socio-economic background, although parental occupation has been demonstrated to be a strong indicator' (BBC 2017b:25.)

These initiatives came in advance of the BBC becoming regulated by Ofcom in April 2017. The new licence framework explicitly requires the BBC to "reflect the full diversity of the UK population" and "raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up ... society". In the future, Ofcom will set diversity targets, including for socioeconomic background, and the BBC will be expected to report on progress (Ofcom 2017b:3, 9-10.) Ofcom subsequently published a survey which examined the distinctiveness of the BBC. Although many findings were positive, it revealed that some younger and working-class respondents viewed the BBC unfavourably, and there was a belief that the Corporation was overly-focussed on middle aged and middle-class audiences (Ofcom 2017a.) Despite the BBC's efforts, the regulator noted that progress on diversity across the broadcast industry had been slow. In terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and sexual orientation, Ofcom said the record had been "woeful" and, as the national broadcaster, the BBC was singled-out for not "leading the way" (Ruddick 2017.) According to its own report, the BBC does indeed have some way to go in terms of socioeconomic diversity: 17 percent of all staff and a quarter of managers went to private school; and 61 percent of staff have parents in higher managerial/professional occupations (BBC 2017b:25.) This latter proportion is twice the national average which could suggest that the BBC is "significantly out of sync with the general population" (Ruddick 2017a.)

Research focus and samples

The Reuters and NCTJ surveys are illuminating but, by presenting a macro-perspective of the whole profession, they inevitably lack finer detail. Similarly, the BBC survey takes a broad view and does not consider journalists as a separate cohort. The Milburn Report *does* look at journalists in isolation and offers comparison with other professions, but it does not analyse BBC staff by themselves. Hence, given the Corporation's obligations as a public service broadcaster, a comprehensive study of the social constitution of senior BBC journalists is a useful addition to the corpus.

Although they are a tiny fraction of the BBC's 8,000 editorial staff (Perry 2014), the 66 senior journalists featured in this paper are crucial to public understanding of political issues. Hence, to assess the extent to which they reflect the UK population, the ten variables listed in *figure one* were noted for each person. To give this study further comparative dimensions, data was also collected for the 27 members of Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's first cabinet, and the 32 politicians who were appointed in October 2016 by the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, to the shadow cabinet (Parliament 2016, 2016a.)

The BBC sample is divided into four sub-groups which incorporate: 11 presenters of BBC One TV news bulletins (category A); 23 journalists from BBC Radio 4 (B); 14 presenters of programmes devoted to political discussion and debate (C); and 18 editors and specialist correspondents (D.) The journalists in the first category were largely self-selecting because, as presenters on the primary BBC TV channel, they are the most well-known among the public. While BBC One appeals to a large, popular audience, news programmes on BBC Radio 4 are consumed by a smaller cohort of elite listeners. Journalists in this subgroup are not as familiar to audiences as their TV counterparts, but they have arguably more influence over public understanding because they interview politicians live on air and often play an important role in setting the news agenda. BBC TV news anchors, however, tend to read the bulletins and introduce comment and analysis from specialist reporters.

Table 1. Variables

V1	Gender
V2	Ethnicity
V3	Age
V4	Parental occupation
V5	Secondary school - type
V6	Secondary school - location
V7	University
V8	Undergraduate subject
V9	Salary
V10	Partner's profession (journalists only)
V11	Previous career (politicians only)

The journalists in category B are the presenters of the four main daily news programmes on BBC Radio 4 (*Today*, the *World at One*; *PM*; the *World Tonight*) and Sunday's *World This Weekend*. Category C includes: five presenters from the *Daily Politics*; four from BBC Two's *Newsnight*; and two from *HardTalk*. The remaining three are the host of the *Andrew Marr Show*, and the respective chairs of BBC One's *Question Time* and the BBC Radio 4 equivalent, *Any Questions?* The fourth group, Category D, consists of specialists and editors who are often interviewed by news presenters to explain or interpret news items in their field. They also question senior politicians, and present segments that are slotted into

news bulletins. The journalists in this category include the BBC's political, economics, business, health, and science editors, and its international editors (Africa, Europe, Middle East, North America, World Affairs.)

With the programmes identified, the next step was to build a list of associated journalists. This was done by first watching and listening to the programmes for the seven days between Friday 24 and Thursday June 30, 2016. This was an exceptionally important week for news because it covered the immediate aftermath of the EU Referendum. The British public's need for clarity and understanding about an unprecedented event with far-reaching ramifications had rarely been greater. The researcher noted which BBC journalists were given the task of explaining what had happened, why it had happened and what the future might hold. The webpages of the programmes in the sample were then checked for other journalistic personnel who might not have been on air during this week. Unlike the politicians, it was surprisingly difficult to find information about journalists' education and background on the BBC website. So, the researcher accumulated the information from a variety of online sources including LinkedIn profiles, Twitter accounts, and newspaper and magazine articles. Wikipedia was used to plug gaps in knowledge and citations were checked against primary sources.

Before considering the results, it is important to emphasise that this sample represents a small proportion of the BBC's news output, and indeed its journalistic workforce. It does not include regional news and focuses on just two national channels (BBC 1 TV and BBC Radio 4.) It also does not cover numerous off-air personnel (such as programme editors, researchers and producers) who are involved in the selection and framing of news stories. Nor does this paper consider departmental heads or senior managers who are involved with crucial editorial decisions. Hence, this paper has several obvious limitations.

Even so, it is equally important to note that the practitioners covered in this study are *the* most senior, and arguably the most widely-known, BBC journalistic staff in politics, economics, business, international affairs and other disciplines. These are the people whom the public depend upon to explain and interpret important national and international events, and to hold powerful figures to account through their questioning. Although limited in scope, this article illuminates the primary interface between the British political elite and the senior reporters of the national public-service broadcaster.

Results and analysis

The following analysis mirrors an individual's life-path. It begins with characteristics that might be described as "accidents of birth", namely age, gender, ethnicity and parental occupation. The second part considers factors during a person's formative years: in childhood (the type and location of secondary school) and in young adulthood (university and subject studied.) The third section looks at three elements of adult life: region of habitation; salary; and, for the journalists, partner's occupation, and for the politicians, former occupation.

Accidents of birth

The distribution of men and women in the BBC and the Conservative cohorts was very similar and both had a clear male bias with percentage ratios of 68:32 and 70:30 respectively. Only the shadow cabinet had an equal split. The BBC group fared better, however, in terms of ethnic representation, and the proportion of non "white British" slightly exceeded the England and Wales figure of 13 percent (Owen 2012.) In this respect, the BBC is relatively diverse, certainly compared with Conservative cabinet which was 93 percent "white British" and had no members with "black/mixed" ethnicity. The Labour shadow cabinet was clearly the most ethnically-varied group with almost one-fifth of its members from minorities. The BBC journalists and both groups of politicians have very similar age profiles, with the mean and median for the three cohorts between 49 and 56 years. Although the shadow cabinet has the greatest proportion of members over 60 years old (28 percent), it also has the most equitable spread across the decades with 16 percent in their thirties. Conversely, none of the politicians are over 70 years old whereas the BBC contingent has four in this decade. In comparison to the age distribution of the 56 million residents of England and Wales, all three sub-samples

are unrepresentative (ONS 2011.) A quarter of these nations' populations are younger than 20 and a further five percent are 79 or older. Unsurprisingly, neither group was represented because people in their 20s rarely have the experience to secure senior positions, and Britons typically retire in their sixties. It is noteworthy, however, that the two nations' median age is a decade lower at 40 years.

Table 2. Parental occupation

	BBC	Cabinet	Shadow	Grand sample
Professions	14	9	7	30
	40%	47%	35%	40%
Business	7	6	0	13
	20%	32%	0%	18%
Media	9	0	0	9
	26%	0%	0%	12%
Working class	5	4	13	22
	14%	21%	65%	30%
Total	35	19	20	74
N/A	31	8	12	51

The fourth variable determined by chance is parental occupation. This is a vital element of social constitution because it governs the economic environment of a child. The offspring of a doctor or university professor, for example, are likely to be raised in a more prosperous household than children born to a factory worker or a cleaner. Middle class families are also less likely to experience periods of unemployment, temporary or part-time working, and generally have greater financial capital than working class families. The important comparative datum here is the proportion of the British population categorised as working class. As noted above, however, class is open to interpretation. For instance, although only a quarter of Britons now have 'routine and manual occupations', 60 percent self-identify as working class (Butler 2016.) According to Savage *et al* (2013), the three lower categories – traditional working class, emergent service workers, and precariat – collectively account for 48 percent of the population. On this basis, around half of the British population can confidently be described as working class.

Although the data are incomplete, online profiles and biographies provide informative snapshots of domestic childhoods. The most apparent inconsistency with the general population is how few individuals were raised in working class families: just 30 percent of the grand sample. *Table 2* shows that this proportion is bolstered greatly by the Labour politicians of whom two-thirds had parents in working class occupations. In contrast, just one in five Conservatives, and one in seven BBC journalists grew up in households that might be deemed working class (parental jobs were listed as electrician, factory worker, taxi driver, lorry driver, and French polisher.) Almost three times as many journalists had parents in the 'professions' (doctor, lawyer, engineer, teacher, army colonel, vicar, etc); a further seven worked in business, commerce or finance; and nine had media-related occupations, with eight of these following in their journalist parents' footsteps. Although one must be wary about making bold statements based on such a small sample, there does appear to be a tendency for the BBC cohort to originate from middle-class families.

Table 3. Type of secondary school

	BBC		Cabinet		Shadow		UK population*
Comprehensive	4	7%	11	41%	19	61%	88%
Grammar	16	27%	9	33%	8	26%	5%
Total – state schools	20	33%	20	74%	27	87%	93%
Independent	40	67%	7	26%	4	13%	7%
Total	60		27		31		100%
N/A	6		0		1		
* In Arnett (2014)							

Formative years

It is important to stress that the relative impact of these four factors is complex, and it is not the intention of this paper to suggest weightings. The preceding findings do suggest, however, that if a person aspires to be a top BBC journalist, advantage is gained if the individual is born to middle class parents. This is compounded in the formative years because only relatively wealthy families can afford to send their children to independent schools. Hence, the type of secondary education in the UK is largely determined by accident of birth, and, because of the high incidence of middle-class parents, it is unsurprising that a far greater proportion of the grand sample (43 percent) experienced a private education than the general population (seven percent.) *Table 3* illustrates that these disparities are largely attributable to the two-thirds of senior BBC journalists who were privately educated. This statistic highlights a particularly stark difference between the journalist cohort and the general population, and to a lesser extent, the political samples. In short, senior BBC journalists are more removed from the general public in terms of secondary education than any other factor analysed so far. Indeed, at 67 percent, this group are almost ten times more likely than the average Briton to have gone to an independent school.

Cross referencing with parental occupation confirms the link between prosperity and education. Twenty-three of the 30 BBC journalists from known professional, business and media homes were privately schooled. In contrast, the five who came from working class backgrounds all went to state schools. Furthermore, the occurrence of privately-educated BBC staff is more than twice that of the Conservative cabinet. Traditionally, this political party has been associated with wealth and privilege, and yet the data suggests that the higher ranks of the BBC are even more elite. This is confirmed by the fact that fewer than one in ten BBC journalists attended non-selective, state comprehensive schools, compared with 41 percent of the cabinet, 61 percent of the shadow cabinet, and 88 percent of the British public.

At first glance, the geographical distribution of the journalists and politicians in their secondary school years appears largely consistent with the national data. *Table 4* shows that 84 percent of the UK population reside in England with 16 percent spread across the three other nations. These are very similar proportions to the locations of secondary education of the BBC and Conservative sub-samples, but there are significant discrepancies across the English regions. The census data shows a relatively even division between the most prosperous areas (London, Home Counties and southern England [LHCS]) at 39 percent of the population, and the rest (Midlands East Anglia [MEA] and Northern England) at 44 percent (ONS 2105.) In the BBC and cabinet samples, however, a disproportionately high proportion (62 percent and 59 percent respectively) were educated in LHCS, and a disproportionately low proportion (20 and 26 percent) spent their childhoods in the other two English regions. With just over a third schooled in LHCS, the shadow cabinet is much more representative but with 44 percent spending this period of their lives in the north – almost twice the actual percentage – and just one member from the three other UK nations, Labour politicians are no more representative of the population by this measurement than the other cohorts.

Table 4. Region of secondary education

Region/nation	Population*			BBC	Cabinet	Shadow
London	8,546,761	13%	39%	62%	59%	37%
Home Counties	9,189,606	14%				
South	8,033,175	12%				
MEA	13,770,211	21%		6%	11%	16%
North	14,782,677	23%		14%	15%	44%
England	54,322,430	84%		82%	85%	97%
Wales	3,099,100	5%		5%	4%	3%
Scotland	5,373,000	8%		12%	7%	0%
N Ireland	1,851,600	3%		0%	4%	0%
Other nations	10,323,700	16%		17%	15%	3%
UK	64,646,130	100%		99%	100%	100%
* ONS 2015, ONS 2014						

The second stage of the formative period occurs in young adulthood when a person either starts work or enters higher education. Around 40 percent of British employees have a degree-level qualification (NCTJ 2012, 32) and in recent years, the proportion of 18-year-olds taking the university option has risen toward a half. This is a historically high number: between 1970 and 1990, when the bulk of our grand sample came of age, participation rates hovered around one in eight (THES 2013.) It is significant, therefore, that almost all journalists and politicians are in this minority. The data also suggests that career prospects are enhanced if the person attended an elite institution. Of the 62 BBC journalists whose higher education is known, 90 percent studied at one of the UK's 24 Russell Group universities, as did 80 percent of the Conservatives. In addition, certain universities are favoured over others: two-thirds of university-educated journalists and a slightly higher proportion of cabinet members graduated from just five institutions. All top five universities in the BBC sample (Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol, Durham, LSE) and the Conservative cohort (Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Exeter, Warwick) are Russell Group. This tendency is not so pronounced among the Labour cohort with 43 percent attending its top five universities (Cambridge, Salford, Durham, Hull, Manchester), only three of which are Russell Group. Furthermore, four shadow cabinet members studied at former polytechnics (which achieved university status after 1992) while none of the journalists or cabinet did, and overall, the Labour politicians attended a relatively broad range of higher education institution.

Table 5 suggests career prospects are further improved by a degree from Oxford or Cambridge. An almost identical proportion of the BBC group and the Conservatives are Oxbridge graduates (45 and 44 percent respectively), and when one considers that fewer than one percent of British 18-year olds enter these universities every year, even the shadow cabinet - at 13 percent - is unrepresentative. Oxford has the edge in both the BBC and Conservative cohorts, with a combined total of 25 alumni compared with 16 for Cambridge. But this difference is largely irrelevant because these two institutions have comparable levels of cachet, and they are way ahead of the third placed universities: Bristol at the BBC with five alumni, and Exeter for the cabinet with three. There is also no discernible variation across the age groups with the younger members of the cohorts just as likely to be Oxbridge graduates as their senior colleagues.

Table 5. Undergraduate universities

	BBC		Cabinet		Shadow	
Oxford	18	28%	7	26%	1	3%
Cambridge	11	17%	5	18%	3	10%
Other universities	33	50%	14	52%	24	83%
Total	62	95%	26	96%	28	96%
None	3	5%	1	4%	1	3%
Total	65		27		29	
N/A	1		0		3	

In terms of undergraduate degree, almost 90 percent of the BBC cohort hold qualifications in just six subject areas. Top of the rankings are courses based on philosophy, politics or economics with eleven graduates, and in joint third place with eight is PPE itself, which combines these three subjects and is unique to Oxford. With nine graduates, modern languages is the second most popular degree, and history, English and law account for the rest of the top six. These 'traditional' subjects are typical of the well-established, elite universities that senior BBC journalists attend. It is, however, notable that only one of the 52 graduates whose degree subject is known studied a natural science, and not one studied journalism or media at undergraduate level. The cabinet has almost identical proportions as the BBC in philosophy, politics or economics; PPE; and history, and both groups have four law graduates. But beyond this significant overlap, the politicians have different and broader intellectual interests that are often related to their later careers (see below.) There is also some common ground within the Labour contingent, over half of whom are either graduates in philosophy, politics or economics, or law. It is noteworthy, however, that none of the shadow cabinet studied PPE at Oxford. Like the Conservatives, the Labour politicians include graduates from a range of subject areas that do not appear in the BBC sample and again, these tend to be mirrored their pre-political careers, particularly related to the social sciences. It is also important to note that just ten percent of the politicians studied STEM subjects, and not one of the 116 graduates in the grand sample read engineering or computer science.

Adult life

The data initially suggests a geographical rebalancing of the BBC and Conservative cohorts during their university years. Compared with the secondary schooling period, the proportion of journalists inhabiting LHCS falls from 62 to 54 percent, and for the cabinet from 59 to 46 percent. The main beneficiary in both cases is Midlands-East Anglia (MEA) with 13 journalists and seven Conservatives spending their university years in this region. However, the clear majority - 11 and five respectively - studied in Cambridge, which has a very different atmosphere and aesthetic to the post-industrial Midlands conurbations of Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham. Indeed, not one BBC journalist or cabinet member studied at these four cities' universities. Cambridge is an anomaly in this region: it is a historic, prosperous and picturesque city, located in a largely agricultural area. In terms of economic status, one could incorporate Cambridge in LHCS (which already includes Oxford), and hence, twenty-eight (45 percent) of the BBC sample (and 42 percent of the Conservatives) spent all their pre-career lives in LHCS/Cambridge. There is also evidence of a 'brain drain' with 17 additional BBC journalists and five cabinet members moving from their provincial home regions to LHCS for university, but only ten and two respectively going in the opposite direction.

Any movements away from the prosperous south, however, appear to be fleeting and the gravitational pull of southeast England appears irresistible. Despite recent efforts to disperse operations to regional centres (notably Salford in northwest England,) the BBC is still based in the capital, and the programmes featured in this study are all produced there. Britain's national newspapers, major broadcasters and magazine publishers are also headquartered in London and earlier studies have noted the distribution of journalists is distinctly tilted toward the capital: whereas 29 percent of all UK employment occurs in London and southeast England, the proportion of the nation's journalists working in this region is between 50 and 60 percent (NCTJ 2012, 23; ONS 2015a.) While the British news media is unequivocally London-centric, politicians are more geographically representative of the nation: one third of the cabinet and two-thirds of the shadow cabinet typically spend some of their working week in their constituencies outside LHCS.

Looking at the life trajectories described in online biographies, it is apparent that a disproportionate number of the BBC sample appear to have spent virtually all their lives in the richer regions of the UK. Relative wealth is also evident in the salary data. At £27,500 per year, average income for British journalists is broadly comparable with the national median (NCTJ 2012, 71.) MPs, however, have a basic gross annual salary of almost £75,000 which is boosted considerably by expenses and allowances (Parliament 2017.) Without taking these extras into consideration, MPs are in the ninth decile of household income in the UK and earn almost three times as much as the typical voter (IFS 2017.) Although there is no definitive record of BBC salaries, one third of the sample earned £150,000 or more in 2016/17 (BBC 2017a.) This is on a par with the prime minister's basic salary which is over five times the national median.

Online profiles and biographies illustrate that the BBC cohort have largely devoted their whole working lives to journalism. The politicians, however, had previous careers and these generally reflect the traditional constituencies of the two main British parties. Eight of the Conservative cabinet, for example, previously worked in business; seven more had careers in finance; and three were corporate lawyers. Another three were employed as political researchers or advisers. Similarly, a quarter of the shadow cabinet worked in politics, including trade unions and charities, before they became MPs, but only one had a career in business. The most common previous career among the Labour cohort was law, with nine, and four more worked in professional roles in the public sector. Only one member of the cabinet and two of the shadow cabinet had previous occupations that could be deemed 'working class.'

With so few politicians having experience of a working-class occupation, both cohorts could be accused of being out of touch with many of their constituents. MPs do, however, interact regularly with voters through constituency surgeries and local campaigns. In the absence of interviews or ethnographies, it is not known how much direct, regular contact senior BBC journalists have with the general population in their daily tasks. The data does suggest, however, that the partners of senior BBC journalists tend to have related careers. Of 31 journalists whose partner's occupations are known, two-thirds work in the media or the arts. Nine of these are fellow journalists, and a further six are associated professionals (producers, editors, etc.) Another seven partners are in business (management consultant, advertising executive, investment manager, etc.) and another seven work in the professions (lawyer, engineer, economist, etc.)

Conclusion

Although every one of the 125 individuals featured in this study has had a unique life trajectory, each group has its own defining characteristics. With the notable exception of ethnic diversity, the BBC cohort has few similarities with the general public: it has a heavy male bias and the majority of members grew up in middle class families in southern England. The most compelling evidence of divergence, however, appears in the formative years. Two-thirds of the journalists attended independent secondary school, compared with a quarter of the Conservatives, one eighth of the shadow cabinet, and one in fourteen Britons. Overall, senior BBC journalists have far more in common with the Conservative cabinet than the British public. Apart from ethnicity and secondary schooling, six other measurements (age; gender; parental

occupation; region of education; universities; and undergraduate subjects) yielded comparable results. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that both cohorts had relatively comfortable life experiences, and if the politicians' previous careers and the occupations of the journalists' partners are factored in, one can also imagine overlap in their social groups. In contrast, the Labour shadow cabinet mainly worked in the public sector. This group is also quite distinct in terms of other metrics. In addition to a much lower incidence of independent schooling and Oxbridge degrees, the Labour cohort has *greater* ethnic diversity than the national population. It also has an equitable split of male and female members, most of whom originate from the English regions, and, with 65 percent having working class origins, it is the most representative in terms of parental occupation.

This paper's findings are largely consistent with previous quantitative studies, but the data suggests that senior BBC journalists are in an even more elite sub-set of the profession. Milburn reported that 54 percent of leading British journalists were privately-educated. The figure for senior BBC journalists is 67 percent which, if this were a separate category in Milburn's rankings, would put it in second place, just eight points below the highest profession (senior judges.) As noted by Reuters and the NCTJ, a degree is now virtually mandatory for a career in journalism which effectively excludes those young adults, typically from low income families, who do not go to university. This paper shows that the higher reaches of BBC journalism are dominated by university graduates, and Oxbridge alumni are even more prevalent (45 percent) than in Milburn's sample (33 percent.)

With the BBC and Ofcom tightly focussed on improving diversity, this paper makes a timely contribution to current debates. More work clearly needs to be done and there are numerous opportunities for future research. A useful starting point would be to acknowledge that diversity is multi-faceted and, if the BBC is to better represent audiences, a more holistic, intersectional approach to data collection is required. Future surveys, interviews and focus groups with journalists might also explore how an individual's environment influences socioeconomic perceptions. Location was only touched upon in this paper, but it is apparent that someone raised against a backdrop of factory, coal mine or shipyard closures would see the world very differently to a person whose formative years were spent in a vibrant and prosperous part of the country. Surveys could also include producers, researchers, programme editors, managers, and other behind-the-scenes staff who are involved in the selection and framing of news stories. Another line of enquiry might investigate the extent to which journalists and audiences have shared lived experiences. If there are differences, this might lead other scholars to question *how* social constitution influences the news product.

This paper underlines the centrality of class in journalism. A person's life experiences play a vital role in determining their sense of normality, and so it follows that if journalists are detached from the general population, they will struggle to identify with common concerns. The most vivid illustration of this phenomenon came in 2017, in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire in London in which 71 people died, mostly ethnic minorities and on low incomes. Shortly after the tragedy, Jon Snow, presenter of *Channel 4 News*, acknowledged the detachment of his profession:

The organic links within our society are badly broken. In part this is because the echelons from which our media are drawn do not, for the most part, fully reflect the population among whom we live and to whom we seek to transmit information and ideas (Snow 2017.)

These sentiments were echoed by Ofcom's chief executive, Sharon White, who identified a clear gap "between the social make-up of the media industry and the wider population we are here to serve" (White 2017.) If, as this paper suggests, senior BBC journalists exist in an elite realm, separated from much of the British public throughout their lives, they will be unable to thoroughly represent the interests of the nation in their work.

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