

# George Entwistle is gone but how to rebuild confidence in the BBC?

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/11/10/the-bbc-in-crisis-a-problem-of-confidence-not-trust/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/11/10/the-bbc-in-crisis-a-problem-of-confidence-not-trust/)

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The fact that George Entwistle has resigned is good news for the BBC – although a personally devastating decision for one honourable individual.\*

The real problem at the BBC right now is not trust, it's confidence. In the long-term trust in the BBC will resume its normally high levels and it deserves that. There is much excellent output from the BBC, and its journalists in particular, that will outlive the present horrendous problems. But confidence in the current BBC leadership amongst the public and employees must be at an all-time low. And the confidence of the BBC to be bold and critical has also been badly hit by this unprecedented shambles. Wider confidence in the very idea of public service broadcasting may also have been damaged.

[Read my latest blog about [what next for the BBC here](#)]

This is not just a diversionary storm whipped up by jealous newspapers with a Leveson-sized grudge. If you really want to end scandals like child abuse then one of the ways is through good journalism. So it's not a distraction from the 'real story' to look at what's gone wrong at the BBC over Savile, Newsnight and the MacAlpine debacle. This matters.

I first investigated paedophile rings while working at the BBC with a reporter called Martin Bashir over 20 years ago. Our editor backed a long and difficult investigation despite knowing that this was a subject with no ratings appeal. So I believe absolutely in the BBC's mission to do ugly and challenging stories. But they are difficult and require careful management.

## Disaster

Yet it's clear that this latest Newsnight investigation (initiated by the independent foundation-funded Bureau For Investigative Journalism) was a thorough-going disaster. There are huge questions about the legal advice, the editorial oversight, and the journalistic process. How come it took a Channel 4 News journalist (Michael Crick) to pick up on the rumours of the impending programme and put the allegations to McAlpine which he immediately denied? The Guardian's veteran investigative reporter David Leigh paints [a damning portrait](#) of a bungled project.

But it's not good enough to say that we'll have some inquiries and sack a Deputy Head of this, or suspend the editor of that. There is a systematic problem of leadership and accountability at the BBC. And tonight's resignation shows that they have at last begun to recognise that.

We all make mistakes. Sometimes, ghastly ones. I can't think of something much worse than falsely accusing a senior (ex) politician of being a paedophile – or at least saying enough to make everyone with access to the Internet think he is. So it is shocking enough how bad this piece of journalism appears, but the handling of it by BBC leadership is even more unbelievable.

## Stormy Weather



BBC DG George Entwistle had already been hauled over the coals by MPs and the media for his hands-off attitude to the first (cancelled) Newsnight film on Savile. Surely he would have learnt the lesson. When a ship hits stormy weather the captain has to get out of the cabin and not only be on the bridge but all over the decks. The nonsense that Entwistle spouts about 'editorial independence' is fine in the most general terms, but when it comes to a specific crisis it is an abnegation of his fundamental responsibilities as the BBC's Editor In Chief.



Yet on the day that the 'McAlpine' Newsnight film was being prepared he says that no-one told him. On the Friday when the Guardian splashed on the fact that Newsnight had got it badly wrong – no-one told him. All those advisors and press officers and fellow managers and editors didn't mention it to him or his office? I can believe that the

DG is in such a bubble that he didn't notice the twitter-storm himself but, seriously, did no-one even mention it to him? This is literally incredible.

Entwistle said he was too busy giving a speech to notice the Guardian piece on Friday. I met someone at the conference where he gave that speech and people – even non-British people – were talking of nothing else. Only George didn't know, we are expected to believe.

### **Most Painful**

As the very fair-minded former ITN boss [Stewart Purvis has made clear](#), Entwistle's defence on the Today Programme and elsewhere is the most 'painful' he's ever witnessed. Stewart's carefully-judged opinion is utterly damning of the DG's performance.

But confidence is not just about one person. The current DG is merely symptomatic of a culture which [I have described in a recent article](#) as a closed system with closed minds – too many life-time BBC bosses without self-critical faculties. Too many barons protecting turf and passing on blame rather than competing to take responsibility.

When (almost) lifetime BBC man Mark Thompson left this year the BBC desperately needed a new broom. As [I said in an article, he was a highly talented chief executive but he was no reformer](#). Instead, Patten and the rest of the Trust chose the status quo, a decent, hard-working, intelligent and committed insider. I can't see the BBC recovering confidence properly under Entwistle but it's not just about George.

### **Inadequate Trust**

The BBC Trust is not adequate. Its chair Chris Patten picked the wrong guy, the wrong strategy and also mishandled his own role in the crisis. He seems to think he is running the BBC when in fact he is supposed to be holding it to account on behalf of the public as well as its charter. This dual role doesn't make sense.

It's time to think about bringing in Ofcom to regulate the BBC and someone else to give the DG more support to act strategically. There needs to be an overhaul of BBC management structures. The BBC is too big for one person to manage it in detail, but there's no reason why it can't be more transparent, devolving power down to departments but also insisting on greater accountability to the centre.

The BBC is not unique. There are other public service broadcasters that offer different models that could inspire reform. The NHS and schools have seen structural revolutions – why not the BBC? It is time for this tired old fortress to be opened up.

### **Hapless Display**

Let's hope Entwistle's hapless display has been a learning process. Perhaps understandably, he thought that the BBC was going through enough upheaval with the cuts and the move to the new newsroom. Chris Patten obviously

thought that what was needed was a sensible chap to keep things steady in the run up to charter renewal in 2016.

I am afraid they were both wrong. The challenge is much bigger and the need for vision much greater than either had realised. The original, deep scandal of Jimmy Savile's reign of abuse at the BBC may have been an historical fact. But the mistakes that have come in its wake speak loudly of a very contemporary crisis of confidence at the BBC.

[Declaration of interest – as well as having worked at the BBC a long time ago I collaborate regularly with the BBC Academy. We also have BBC people to speak regularly – just this term Mary Hockaday gave [an inspiring vision](#) of BBC traditional values in the new setting of the integrated newsroom. I don't get income from them or funding – I wish I did – but I am happy for Polis to be described as a 'critical' supporter of the BBC]

Here some links to other articles on the same subject – I don't endorse them 100% but all interesting:

Some [speeches by ex DG Mark Thompson last week](#)

Former Panorama legend John Ware [defends the BBC](#)

[An article on Australia's Mark Scott of ABC](#) – he'd be good

Jeremy Paxman's slightly [over-dramatic but not inaccurate reaction](#)

Guardian investigative hack David Leigh's [excellent summary of what went wrong at Newsnight](#)

Good legal background here from Infromm [on McAlpine and libel law](#)

A rather complacent [view from Guardian's Jackie Ashley](#) who fails to mention that she is married to someone on a very generous contract at the BBC

A fairly routine critique by [The Times Libby Purves](#) (who also works for the BBC)

\* The [£1.3 million pay-off](#) may ease his pain

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