

Taking on the telly: Newsnight and Policy Exchange

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2007/12/13/taking-on-the-telly/

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Last night's clash between [Newsnight](#)'s Jeremy Paxman and Dean Godson, the boss of think-tank [Policy Exchange](#) was a better contest than Ricky Hatton against Merryweather. But while the TV sparks that flew were bright, they also illuminated some darker corners of the media world we now inhabit.

In short, Newsnight accused [Policy Exchange](#) of publishing a report that contained falsified evidence. The original Policy Exchange think-tank [report](#) had alleged that a number of British mosques and community centres had extremist literature on sale. The Newsnight TV [report](#) appeared to show pretty conclusively that (a relatively small amount of) the evidence was fabricated – why and by whom was not established.

Dean Godson mounted a stout defence saying that the overall conclusions of the report were still valid, while Jeremy Paxman stated that it was difficult to believe any of it if at least part was proved false. It was not a pleasant bit of telly, with Godson coming over as vindictive and stubborn (he has always seemed pretty principled and sane to me) while Paxman ended up having to bluster in defence of his editor, Peter Barron.

This is a blow to Policy Exchange which was starting to make a name for itself with some brave and counter-intuitive thinking. This report in particular made a lot of headlines. Leftwing blogs like [Labourhome](#) are delighted at their discomfort, because Policy Exchange is now firmly in the Tory camp, despite an earlier sense that it was intellectually independent.

[Osama Saeed](#) (Scottish Muslim political blogger) is even more gleeful, and the posters on his site go on to make all sorts of interesting allegations which soon veer in to the conspiracy theory realm.

[Harry's Place](#) is a bit more balanced and the posters there have some interesting theories on the use of ink-jet printers which reminds me of the whole right-wing blogosphere exposure of CBS/Dan Rather's 'fake' Bush [Killian](#) documents.

Of course, Dean Godson has responded on his website and Peter Barron has done the same on the editor's blog for [Newsnight](#) where he quite rightly concludes that:

Mr Godson says he stands by his report 100%. I also stand by our report 100%. I don't think we can both be right.

The great thing about this whole dispute is how New Media allows us to get a whole range of reference points and detail. Godson was brave enough to go on Newsnight and make his case when he knew that the TV people had the power to package it in their own favour. But the bloggers and the websites have allowed us to make up our own minds.

Personally, I am sure that Policy Exchange probably did find some extremist literature in places where it should not be given shelf-room. They did well to take on this important investigation. But in this very sensitive area both journalists and think-tank researchers need to be 99% sure of their facts and credibility before they feed flames of community conflict. In this case Policy Exchange are now on shaky ground and bit more humility would have done them a power of good both on screen and in the real world.

Go [here](#) to see what their chairman Charles Moore wrote in their defence.

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