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Top Gear's electric car shows pour petrol over the BBC's standards

Why is Top Gear apparently exempt from the BBC's editorial guidelines and the duty not to fake the facts? ● Tesla sues Top Gear over 'faked' electric car race ● The Nissan Leaf electric car - review

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What distinguishes the BBC from the rest of this country's media? There's the lack of advertising, and the lack of a proprietor with specific business interests to defend. But perhaps the most important factor is its editorial guidelines, which are supposed to ensure that the corporation achieves "the highest standards of due accuracy and impartiality and strive[s] to avoid knowingly and materially misleading our audiences."

Here's a few of the things they say:

"Trust is the foundation of the BBC: we are independent, impartial and honest."

"We will be rigorous in establishing the truth of the story and well informed when explaining it. Our specialist expertise will bring authority and analysis to the complex world in which we live."

"We will be open in acknowledging mistakes when they are made and encourage a culture of willingness to learn from them."

Woe betide the producer or presenter who breaches these guidelines. Unless, that is, they work for Top Gear. If so, they are permitted to drive a coach and horses - or a Hummer H3 - through them whenever they please.

Take, for example, Top Gear's line on electric cars. Casting aside any pretence of impartiality or rigour, it has set out to show that electric cars are useless. If the facts don't fit, it bends them until they do.

It's currently being sued by electric car maker Tesla after claiming, among other allegations, that the Roadster's true range is only 55 miles per charge (rather than 211), and that it unexpectedly ran out of charge. Tesla says "the breakdowns were staged and the statements are untrue". But the BBC keeps syndicating the episode to other networks. So much for "acknowledging mistakes when they are made".

Now it's been caught red-handed faking another trial, in this case of the Nissan LEAF.

Last Sunday, an episode of Top Gear showed Jeremy Clarkson and James May setting off for Cleethorpes in Lincolnshire, 60 miles away. The car unexpectedly ran out of charge when they got to Lincoln, and had to be pushed. They concluded that "electric cars are not the future".

But it wasn't unexpected: Nissan has a monitoring device in the car which transmits information on the state of the battery. This shows that, while the company delivered the car to Top Gear fully charged, the programme-makers ran the battery down before Clarkson and May set off, until only 40% of the charge was left. Moreover, they must have known this, as the electronic display tells the driver how many miles' worth of electricity they have, and the sat-nav tells them if they don't have enough charge to reach their destination. In this case it told them - before they set out on their 60-mile journey - that they had 30 miles' worth of electricity. But, as Ben Webster of the Times reported earlier this week, "at no point were viewers told that the battery had been more than half empty at the start of the trip."

It gets worse. As Webster points out, in order to stage a breakdown in Lincoln, "it appeared that the Leaf was driven in loops for more than 10 miles in Lincoln until the battery was flat."

When Jeremy Clarkson was challenged about this, he admitted that he knew the car had only a small charge before he set out. But, he said: "That's how TV works".

Not on the BBC it isn't, or not unless your programme is called Top Gear.

Top Gear's response, by its executive producer Andy Wilman, is a masterpiece of distraction and obfuscation. He insists that the programme wasn't testing the range claims of the vehicles, and nor did it state that the vehicles wouldn't achieve their claimed range. But the point is that it creates the strong impression that the car ran out of juice unexpectedly, leaving the presenters stranded in Lincoln, a city with no public charging points.

Yes, this is an entertainment programme, yes it's larking about, and sometimes it's very funny. But none of this exempts it from the BBC's guidelines and the duty not to fake the facts.

The issue is made all the more potent by the fact that Top Gear has a political agenda. It's a mouthpiece for an extreme form of libertarianism and individualism. It derides attempts to protect the environment, and promotes the kind of driving that threatens other people's peace and other people's lives. It often creates the impression that the rules and restraints which seek to protect us from each other are there to be broken.

This is dangerous territory. Boy racers, in many parts of the countryside, are among the greatest hazards to local people's lives. Where I live, in rural mid-Wales, the roads are treated as race tracks. Many of the young lads who use them compete to see who can clock up the fastest speeds on a given stretch. The consequences are terrible: a series of hideous crashes involving young men and women driving too fast, which kill other people or maim them for life. In the latest horror, just down the road from where I live, a young man bumped another car through a fence and into a reservoir. Four of the five passengers drowned.

Of course I'm not blaming only Top Gear for this, but it plays a major role in creating a comfort zone within which edgy driving is considered acceptable, even admirable. Top Gear's political agenda also persists in stark contradiction to BBC rules on impartiality.

So how does it get away with it? It's simple. It makes the BBC a fortune. Both the 15th and 16th series of Top Gear were among the top five TV programmes sold internationally by BBC Worldwide over the last financial year. Another section of the editorial guidelines tells us that "our audiences should be confident that our decisions are not influenced by outside interests, political or commercial pressures". But in this case we can't be. I suggest that it is purely because of commercial pressures that Top Gear is allowed to rig the evidence, fake its trials, pour petrol over the BBC's standards and put a match to them. The money drives all before it.

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