

How did this slanted, sloppy story get broadcast?

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NOTEBOOK



Last Friday morning, at 6, 7, 8 and 9am, the news on BBC Radio 4 led with the story that "The boss of an NHS Trust has asked the BBC to put him in touch with a fashion company making protective gowns, because he fears he's about to run out". The reporter, Simon Browning, said that the executive had asked for the phone number of a Burberry factory. The story accused the Government of falling down on PPE "despite assurances from ministers that there's enough to go round". The NHS "boss" reportedly described the Government's claim there was no shortage of gowns as "fantasy".

This sounded odd to me. Was the NHS boss so clueless that he had to ask our national broadcaster how to get hold of Burberry? If so, could one trust him to get PPE from anywhere? I was also suspicious of the fact that the source refused to speak directly and that the *Today* programme which followed the news did not follow up the report. It seemed sketchy.

Later that day, modestly concealed in the Business section of the BBC News website, a "correction" appeared: "We should clarify that the person concerned is not the boss of an NHS trust but is part of a network of organisations helping to source

personal protective equipment for some NHS trusts. The mistake was caused by a misunderstanding of the person's role in the fight against the pandemic." The correction understated the problem. If the person looking for Burberry was not an NHS boss, but only someone who was helping chase PPE gowns, it was not worthy of the national news at all, let alone the hourly lead. The BBC's "misunderstanding of the person's role" collapsed the entire tale.

How did this story get broadcast, then? Only, one must presume, because of "confirmation bias" – the tendency to find what you want, regardless of whether it is there. Every day in the Covid-19 crisis, the BBC wants stories which allow it to side with another largely unaccountable national institution, the NHS, and against the Government.

This is not impartial, properly checked news. It also, I suspect, conflicts with the public mood. Obviously people want incompetence exposed, but in this crisis the difficulties are sufficiently acute for most people to be less concerned with pillorying ministers, more with trying to help. The BBC never sees this.